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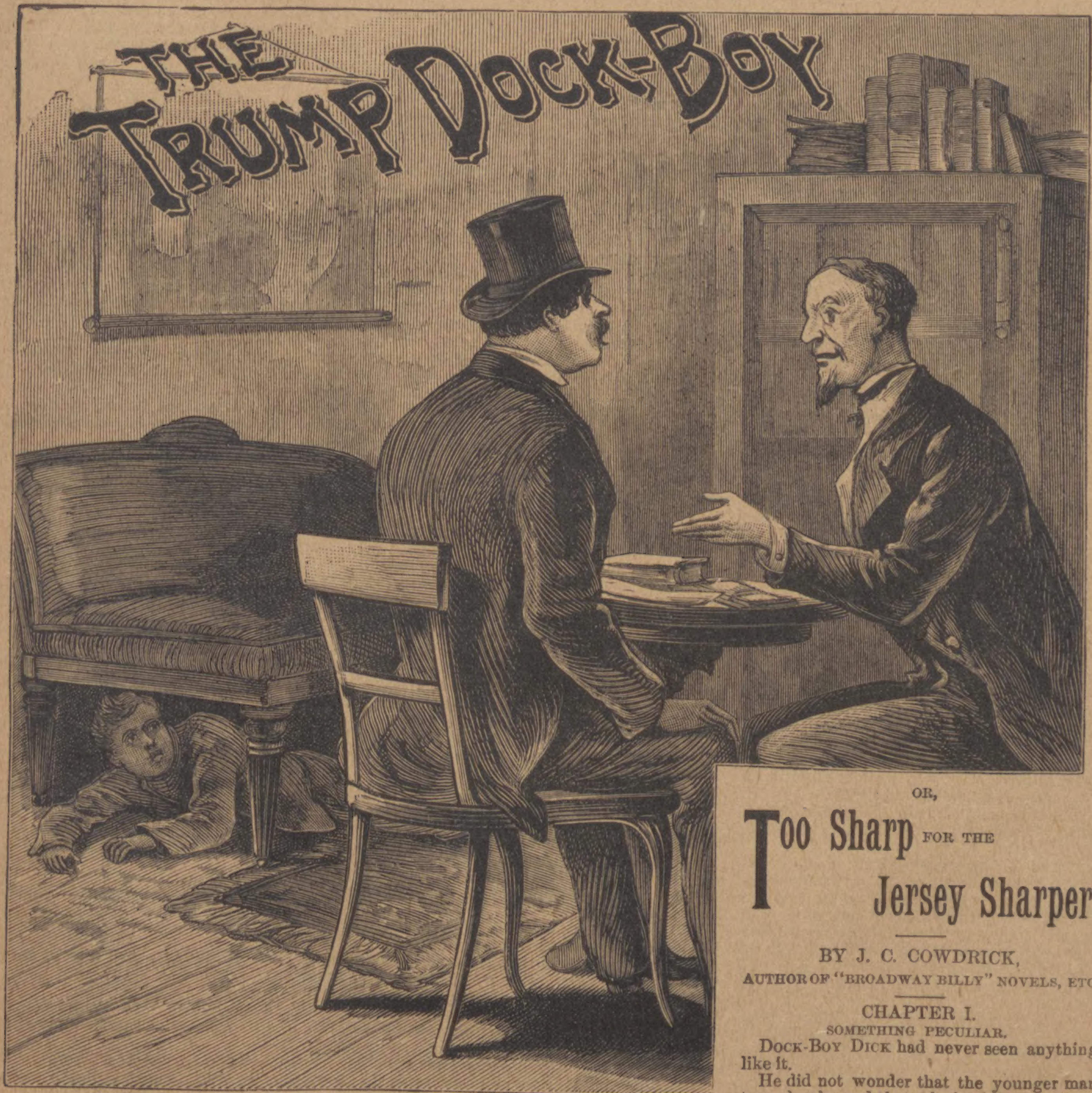
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DOCK-BOY DICK NOTICED THAT THE DETECTIVE GAVE A START.

OR,
Too Sharp FOR THE
Jersey Sharper.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,
AUTHOR OF "BROADWAY BILLY" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.
SOMETHING PECULIAR.
Dock-Boy Dick had never seen anything like it.
He did not wonder that the younger man turned pale, and that a look of horror came into his face.

The hand the elder man extended was a skeleton! Or, at any rate, it was so withered that it looked to be nothing but bones, and even the dock-boy felt something of a shock at sight of it.

The scene was on the pier of one of the Gulf steamship lines.

A steamer had just been warped in, the passengers were alighting, and Dock-boy Dick was watching for an opportunity to turn an honest penny.

He was a youth of eighteen or so, and was "runner" for one of the down-town hotels, his territory being the docks and ferries along the East River, with which he was thoroughly familiar.

Dock-boy Dick had opened his eyes for the first time in the world in that vicinity, and there had spent his boyhood days, receiving the nickname that still clung to him. He had been what is commonly called a "dock rat,"—one of the genus gamin of the water-fronts.

He had made his own way thus far in the world, and was calculated to make it still further.

Dick, that day, was politely accosting the passengers, as they passed down the gangway, mentioning the name of his hotel, and requesting to carry baggage.

Among others came a fine-looking young man, maybe twenty-six years of age, of dark complexion, with black hair and mustache, and faultlessly dressed. He carried a grip in his hand.

Dock-boy Dick was on the point of speaking to him, when he met with the surprise mentioned.

A rather good-looking, portly gentleman, maybe fifty-five years of age, well dressed and seemingly well-to-do in worldly goods, stepped quickly forward and addressed the young man.

"My dear Philip!" he exclaimed, and put forth his right hand.

The expression of the younger man's face changed instantly from one of pleasure to such as we have described.

He drew back his own hand, before it could be grasped, and, in the same moment, the elder gentleman, realizing what he had done, as Dock-boy Dick read his mind, made haste to say:

"Your pardon, Philip, your pardon! My joy at seeing you was so great that I forgot my deformity, for the moment. No harm done, and here is my left; take hold of that and see how it feels. I don't blame you for refusing the right; would refuse it myself, if I could. Ha, ha, ha!"

He put forth his left hand, which was grasped heartily, and he laughed lightly as he concluded his remark.

They had moved a few paces from the gangway while speaking.

Dock-boy Dick still observed them, to the neglect of business. That skeleton hand interested him.

As said, Dick had never seen anything like it, and his curiosity was aroused to get another glimpse of it. In another moment he felt an interest in what they said.

The elder gentleman had thrust his withered hand inside the breast of his coat, out of sight.

"And I beg your pardon, uncle," the younger man hastened to say, "for so reminding you of your misfortune, but the recollection of all that I have heard in connection with your skeleton hand came to my mind with a rush, at sight of it, and I could not help showing the shock it gave me. But, there is nothing in the superstition, of course."

"I don't know about that, Philip," more soberly; "I am inclined to think there is a good deal in it. Now that I am over the natural excitement of the moment, I don't see how I so far forgot myself as to offer you that hand."

"Well, let us say no more about it."

"I would not, in truth, have you take that hand in yours, Philip, for all I am worth in the world."

"Pshaw, uncle! It is mere superstition that the person that grasps that hand will die within a year; I do not believe a word of it. Still, as I said, the sight of it was a shock, for a moment."

"And you took care not to take the risk; ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, it was so sudden. I was not thinking about your withered hand at the moment. When you thrust it out at me the recollection came in upon me with a rush, and my drawing back was more an involuntary act than it was an act produced by the will. I will take it now, if you offer it."

Dock-boy Dick noticed that their eyes met steadily.

"You don't mean it?" the elder doubted.

"Try me and see!"

"You would take the risk of dying within the year?"

"Pooh! There is nothing in that, Uncle Joseph. Give me your hand now, and I will prove it."

"I'll bet you a good cigar that you will back down, young man, if I show that hand again, the same as you did the first time. You can't help it, even if it is only superstition."

"Try me."

They had drawn aside out of the rush of passengers, and no one was observing them save sharp-eyed Dock-boy Dick.

He pretended not to be paying any attention, but was losing nothing of all that was said. Scarce a minute had elapsed since the young man had stepped on shore.

The elder drew the skeleton hand out from under his coat.

He did not appear as if he meant to extend it, but merely to test the younger man.

With a quick motion, though, the young man reached forward and had hold of it before the other could thrust it out of sight, and he held it for a moment.

"Let go!" exclaimed the other, excitedly. "I did not think you would do that, Phil. I did not mean to let you get hold of it; I merely wanted to see if you would have the nerve to reach for it."

"Well, you have seen," cried the younger, with a light laugh.

"Yes, and I'm sorry for it."

"Don't let it worry you; I'm sure it shall not trouble me."

"But, it does worry me, all the same. You do not know the fatality of my skeleton hand as I know it—Great heavens! why did you do it?"

"Just to prove what I said in the first place, and that I am no believer in such superstitions. Because a man happens to touch your withered hand, and happens to die within a year, is no proof that the hand had anything to do with his death."

"I don't know, I don't know; I am sorry it happened."

"Think no more about it."

"How can I help it?"

"By thinking about something else. Come, enough of this fol de-rol; what are you going to do with me?"

"I wish I could regard it as lightly as you do, Philip. But, I can't. You have knocked all my pleasure into a cocked hat by your rashness."

"There, there, no more of it. What are you going to do with me, I asked you, sir?"

The younger man assumed a jaunty, playful air.

"Why, we must go to a hotel, of course. I have not been in town an hour myself, and so have not had time to locate; came right here—"

"Carry your grip, sir? Carry your grip?" a voice interrupted, and a youth made an effort to get hold of the young man's handbag. "Pilot you straight to a good hotel,

sir; all the home comforts of life and a good many more."

Dick succeeded in getting hold of the handbag, and held fast while he awaited the decision.

The two men looked at each other.

"What hotel is it?" asked the elder. "The Brimton, sir; best of its class in town, sir. Right near Broadway, and convenient to all points of interest—"

"Well, say no more about it; lead the way."

The owner of the handbag released his hold, and Dock-boy Dick turned away with it with a grin on his face.

"Thought I could do it," he said to himself, "soon's he said hotel. Didn't draw a blank, after all, even if I did monkey away time listening to what was none of my business."

He led the way, the two gentlemen following him, talking.

"Hang me for a fiddler if I wouldn't like to know more about that skeleton hand, though," Dock-boy Dick muttered to himself, as he went along. "There is something of a mystery about it all. I'd like to hear the whole story, and I'd like to know whether that fellow lives the year out. Wonder if I can't?"

CHAPTER II.

THE CURTAIN LIFTED A LITTLE.

DOCK-BOY DICK was a familiar figure around the Hotel Brimton.

Not that he spent his time there, but he was a frequent comer, and on every visit, nearly, he brought guests.

He was the direct means of bringing many dollars to the till, and his service was appreciated. So much so, that he had been given a humble lodging in the house free of cost.

This was besides his regular commission.

He had a little room, away up under the roof, but still a comfortable and cozy place.

It was always ready for him, and he made use of it quite often. In fact, Dock-boy Dick had come to be looked upon as a regular *attache* of the house.

When he reached the house, on this occasion, with the two men, he conducted them straight to the clerk's desk.

"Two gents that wanted to find a first class, gilt-edge, A-number-one hotel, and I brought them right here," he rattled rapidly.

"You'll find this the best house of its size in town, sirs."

He put down the grip as he spoke.

"And how much do we owe you for the service?" asked the younger man.

"Oh, anything you please, long as it ain't less'n a quarter, an' not more'n five dollars."

"All right; here's a half, an' much obliged to you."

He tossed a coin which Dick caught deftly, and the boy turned away while they registered.

When they had done so, and a call-boy had taken them up to their room, Dick again approached the desk and said to the clerk:

"Best I could do, Charlie."

"Two are better than none, Dick."

"You noticed that the old fellow kept one hand out of sight, didn't you?"

"Yes: the young one registered for him. What of it? What's the matter with his hand?"

"No meat on it."

"What?"

"It's a skeleton."

"Get out!"

"Oh, but it's the fact; and thereby hangs a tale."

"What is it?"

"That's what I'm dyin' to know, Charlie. Wish I had some way of findin' out all about it."

Dick thereupon told what he knew, and the clerk, too, became interested in the matter. It certainly did seem to be a little out of the usual, for strangeness.

"Well, maybe I'll find out more about it, Dick, and if I do I will let you know," assured the clerk.

"All right; wish you would. But, who are they, and where from?"

"The old fellow's name is Joseph Belchaine, from a big town out in Jersey, and the other is Philip Holland, from New Orleans."

"And we can guess a good deal of the rest, Charlie. The young one called the old one uncle. His mam must 'a' married a Southern man, an that's how he comes by his dark skin."

"Maybe you are right."

"I'll bet pennies to buttons I am."

"Hello! here is the old one back again, Dick."

True enough; Joseph Belchaine had come down and was approaching the desk.

"Hal!" he exclaimed, as he came up, laying a hand on Dick's shoulder, "you are the very one I'm looking for, my lad."

"Me?" said Dick.

"Yes; have a message I want delivered, and you seem a likely fellow."

"All right, sir; I am your sardine, if there is money in it. Where is your message? And where to?"

"Come up to my room. My nephew will write it."

"All right, sir."

The dock-boy gave the clerk a wink, and followed the elder man to the elevator.

On the second floor the gentleman led the way to the door of an elegant room, opened it with his left hand—he carried the right under the breast of his coat—and bade Dick enter.

The boy did so, with a sort of timidity.

It was one of the most elegant rooms the house afforded, of which Dick had only had glimpses heretofore.

The old gentleman followed him in, closing the door after him.

By a window on the other side of the room was seated the younger man, examining a brilliant object which he held in his fingers.

"Sit down, young man," Belchaine commanded.

Dick dropped on a chair near the door, twirling his cap in his hands.

"I don't know about it, uncle," spoke up the younger man. "I believe I will not run the risk."

"Why, of course not, if you are going to make a display of it and let the fellow know what he is to carry," cried the uncle, in somewhat of displeasure. "What did you show it for?"

"Oh, it isn't that I don't consider the boy honest, uncle; I believe he would take all the more care, knowing the value of the thing, and deliver it in perfect safety, barring accident; but, it is just that risk that I dare not assume. A four-thousand-dollar brilliant is not to be picked on every bush!"

He held the diamond up to the light, and its flashes were almost like sparks of fire.

"You wanted me to carry that thing?" cried Dock-boy Dick.

"That was my plan," said the uncle.

"Well, count me out of it, if you please, sir. It wouldn't 'a' been fair to trust it to me and not let me know what it was, so's I could take extra care of it, an' you couldn't trust me that far, I wouldn't carry it now if I was a whole Express company!"

"Neither would I, in your place, my lad," said Philip Holland. "Uncle, you made a blunder, and I don't hesitate in telling you so."

"You are just as blunt as your mother was, Phil."

"I mean it."

"Yes, I know you do. Well, we shall not want you, my lad, after all."

"Hold on," spoke up the younger, motioning Dick to remain seated. "I like your

face, my boy, and I would trust you with a bagful of diamonds."

"Glad to know it, sir. I mean to be honest."

"I know it. For that reason I want to explain why I have decided not to trust this gem to your keeping."

"That ain't none of my business, sir."

"Yes, it is, after what my uncle has said. It is not many years since I was very sensitive. I know just how I would feel in your place, my boy."

"Just like his mother!" muttered Belchaine.

"What's my feelin's got ter do with it?" demanded Dick, civilly.

"Everything to do with it. This diamond is worth four thousand dollars," again holding it up. "Were it worth no more, I would insist upon your taking it to the lapidary for me, but it has an additional value. It is a stone that has been in the family for years and years."

"I see."

"I am soon to be married, and my uncle has brought the gem to light and given it to me for my bride. It has decked the fingers of no less than six brides in the family, every one of whom lived to ripe old age, and mine will be the seventh, if the stone be not lost. You will now understand, I trust, how highly I prize it above the mere intrinsic value."

"Yes, sir; I see just how it is," assented Dick.

"I hope you do, anyhow. I make this explanation by way of apology for what my uncle has thoughtlessly said to wound your feelings, my boy. I hope you will believe that he did not mean it that way."

"Nonsense, Philip, nonsense!" exclaimed the uncle, testily. "Why do you stoop to apologize to a boy?"

"Because, uncle, I was a boy once myself, and I hope that now I am a gentleman."

"Tut-tut! I hope we are not coming to a variance, Philip."

"I fear we are likely to, unless we stop short."

"Then let us stop, by all means."

"Agreed. That is all, my lad; and if we never meet again, just bear in mind that I wish you well."

"You bet I will!" cried Dick. "I take to you like gas takes to fire, and if I could ever do you a good turn, I'd like to do it. Not likely you'll ever want me, but if you do, just remember that my name is Dock boy Dick, and that I am yours truly, on demand."

CHAPTER III.

MENTIONS RENAUD SERPOLET.

Dock-Boy Dick went down to the office in a puzzled state of mind.

There seemed to him something peculiar about these two men, and he hardly knew what to think of them.

He believed that the younger was strictly right in every way, but he could not think the same of the elder. But, perhaps that was natural now.

Dick was a boy of strictly honest intention and purpose, and it had hurt him to have his honesty doubted, even by a stranger; yet, when he came to look at it, could he blame the man?

He thought not.

That, then, was not the cause of his bad opinion of the uncle.

Not caring to make explanation to his friend, the clerk, Dick passed out of the hotel at once.

Meantime, the uncle and nephew were having some words, which began about as soon as Dick left the room.

The uncle was of a choleric temperament; the words of his nephew had to a degree roused him, and he could not help firing out.

"Well, a pretty state of things!" he exclaimed. "A pretty state of things, I must say, sir!"

"What's the matter?" asked the young man.

"The matter? Why, the idea! A man with Belchaine blood in his veins, offering apology to an unknown boy of the street!"

"Well, uncle, the Belchaines were gentle men, were they not? And when a gentleman has unintentionally wounded the feelings of any one, he tries to make amends for it, does he not?"

"Worse and worse! It was my affair that you took up, young man, and will you say that I am no gentleman?"

"Now, uncle, don't make it worse than it is—"

"Not easy to do."

"It has all been done, and if I am in the wrong, let it rest so. As the younger, I offer my humble apology to you, sir. Here is my hand; let us begin all over again."

The elder hesitated a moment, made a motion as if to offer his withered hand, but extended his left.

"You are right, boy," he said, heartily. "I'm ashamed of myself for my haste. You cannot help what you are; your father was not a Belchaine. I am so apt to overlook that."

The young man colored, slightly, but checked himself before speaking.

"No, he was a Holland," he said.

"And I wondered what the issue would be like, when your mother married him. You are a fair sample of what was to be expected."

"I am aware that you never liked my father, sir," spoke the younger man, with forced calmness, "but I am ready to defend his memory if you speak further against him. For my mother's sake, let us be friends."

"That is the right chord, my boy! Your hand again, please."

He put out his hand again, and the young man took it heartily, saying as he did so:

"I think, uncle, that if you will forget that I am my father's son, and if I bear constantly in mind that you are my mother's brother, that we shall get along well enough."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I will leave it for you to analyze at your leisure. But, here; this diamond; what shall I do with it?"

"Why, keep it, my boy, of course! You know the name and address of that lapidary, now, and you must get it to him as best you can, since you had to upset my plan."

"I had rather have it set just as it is, and never mind the chipped angle."

"And I want you to have it re-ground and made perfect. It will turn out all the handsomer for it. Do you know what I said when I got your letter?"

"I do not, sir."

"Well, I said to myself: 'Heigh-ho! the young man is going to marry a Gueret, is he? Noble family. He will redeem his mother's mistake—'

"Have a care, sir!"

"I am telling you just what I said, Philip. Said I to myself, 'Here is blood worthy to wear the Belchaine diamond; I will give it to him for his bride.' That was what I said to myself, sir."

"Well, I am glad that I happened to please you; but, I suppose I have a good deal of my mother's blood in me, and, whether you approved or not, I would marry just the same. That was what my mother said, I believe, and, from my point of view, I cannot see that she made any serious mistake."

"Bound to bring that up, are you?"

"What I was going to say, uncle: I appreciate the gift of this diamond, appreciate it highly; but I had much rather have it set just as it is, as I said before, than have it touched to the wheel. And I am sure that

my bride will appreciate it all the more, too."

"I insist upon having my way about it, Philip. It shall be cut and polished anew. Why, another thousand dollars will be added to its value!"

"Its money value is nothing to me, sir."

"Will you allow me to have my way, or will you not?"

"Have your way, certainly, uncle, since you insist upon it."

"Very well, then you will have it cut and polished, as I have directed, and I know of no better workman than Renaud Serpolet."

"Will you go with me to his place, then?"

"If you desire."

"You know I am a stranger here. By leaving it with him now, he ought to have it done by the time I am ready to return home, even if he does not have it finished in time for setting."

"Yes, that is true."

"Then let us go immediately."

"I am ready."

The young man dropped the diamond into a pocket, carefully, and the two left their room and the house.

Making their way to the French quarter of the city, they finally applied at a rather forlorn-looking house, where they made inquiry for one Renaud Serpolet.

He no longer lived there. He had moved away a long time before, but perhaps so-and-so could tell something about him. So and so directed them to some one else, until finally they found the right place.

To judge by appearances, Serpolet had gone down in the world instead of rising, and Philip Holland expressed his doubts about the fellow.

This rather angered the uncle, who claimed to have known the man for years.

"Poverty is no crime, is it?" he cried. "French artisans seldom get rich, as you ought to know, for they spend as they go, and this fellow Serpolet has a mighty extravagant wife."

"You ought to know, uncle, and if you are willing to risk the Belchaine diamond here, certainly I should be."

"Then come on."

There was no bell to the door of the dingy tenement, nor was the door fastened, and they pushed it open and made their way up-stairs.

Belchaine led the way—as if he knew it, his nephew thought; but, finally, he stopped and made inquiry, of a girl they met on the stairs, whether one Serpolet lived there or not.

They learned that he did, and that this girl was one of his numerous progeny, and the door was pointed out to them.

Belchaine knocked with his cane.

The door was opened, after a moment of hurried confusion within, and a woman stood before them.

She was good-looking, despite poverty and numerous children, and had her hair dressed to a faultless nicety; but her dress, of rich material, was sadly soiled and in need of repair."

"Is Mr. Serpolet at home?" asked Belchaine.

"No, monsieur, he is not," was the answer, with a strong French accent.

"And when will he be at home?"

"Not before eleven o'clock to-night, messieurs. He has gone to Philadelphia with some finished work."

The uncle and nephew looked at each other, and the uncle shook his head in the negative. He would not trust the Belchaine diamond to the keeping of this woman.

"We will call again, madame," he said.

"Possibly to-night, at the hour of your husband's arrival. If not, then to-morrow, and you will please ask him to remain at

home to receive us. My card; he will know the name."

And the two men left the house.

CHAPTER IV.

DICK TAKES A HAND.

Dock-Boy Dick was out late that night.

This did not frequently happen, but it did happen occasionally, yet generally with good reason.

As he was all alone in the world, with no one to account to but himself, it made little difference. And yet he was a pretty good guardian of his own conduct, withal.

The fact of the business was this:

Dock-boy Dick was something of an amateur detective in his way, and occasionally he rendered material aid to the police.

On this night he had been out with the river police, trying to clear up a little mystery that had fallen in their way, and it was after one o'clock in the morning when he reached the hotel.

Of course, he knew the night clerk as well as the day clerk.

What was his surprise, as he passed along the corridor toward the office, to find there the man with the skeleton hand, pacing up and down!

The man stopped and eyed Dick sharply as he entered, but immediately resumed his walking, and Dick passed on to the desk, where the night clerk sat admiring the reflection of his diamond stud in a hand glass.

Dick stopped and spoke to him.

"How goes it, Wallie?"

"Hello! is it you, Dick?"

"I guess so. But, say, what's the matter with the old party? Has he got the bats and can't sleep?"

"He is worried about his nephew. They are both stopping here, and the young man went out about half-past ten, and hasn't shown up yet. The old fellow is getting flurried."

Dock-boy Dick received this news with much interest.

"Hang me, if I don't feel a little anxious myself," he declared.

"You?"

"Yes. I brought them here this morning, and that young fellow is a real brick, with all his corners on. Think I'll try to hunt him up."

"Oh, he'll turn up all in good time; he is only sampling the elephant, maybe."

"And maybe the elephant has trampled him."

"I hardly think so."

"Why?"

"Because he was no country guy; he was square-cut, and I'll bet he knows the ropes all right."

"What does the old gent think about it?"

"He don't know what to think."

"And what is he going to do?"

"He says if he is not here in ten minutes, he is going to put the police on the case."

"What he ought to have done in the first place."

"Yes, he knows that but he has been expecting him every minute. He seems to be all cut up."

"Don't wonder. Where did the young man set out to go?"

"To take a diamond somewhere, if I understand it right. Seems like a queer time of night to do that."

"You are right, and the whole affair is queer."

"What more do you know?"

"Did Charlie tell you anything about them?"

"Not a word."

"Well, there is a superstition that if anybody touches this old fellow's skeleton hand, that person will die inside of a year, and his nephew shook hands with him to-day by that hand."

"And maybe that is what the old man is worrying about."

"Of course it is!"

"Well, I'd like to see the young fellow turn up, and put him out of his fret. He makes me nervous."

"I'm half afraid that he won't turn up, Wallie. Guess I will have to sally out and see if I can't find him, for he used me real white, and I liked him for it. He was no snob."

With that Dick turned away and accosted Mr. Belchaine.

"The clerk here tells me you have lost your nephew, sir," he said.

"Yes, yes, so I have, my boy. By the way, you are the same fellow who brought us here, are you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought so. Philip took quite a fancy to you."

"And so did I to him, sir. I am goin' to set out and find him, if you will give me a pointer."

"You?"

"Yes; why not?"

"What do you suppose you can do?"

"As much as any other feller of my size and weight, every time."

The old gentleman was eying Dick from head to feet, as if trying to make up his mind concerning him.

"You seem to have self-confidence," he remarked.

"I have got enough to see me through, I think," was the rejoinder.

"And what kind of a pointer do you require?"

"Where did Phil set out to go?"

"Phil? It strikes me that you are rather familiar with my nephew's name, my young gentleman."

"There is no time now to put on any frills and trimmings," declared Dick, in his sprightly manner. "If you don't like my style, say so. But, I am going to find that young man!"

"You seem to mean it."

A smile curled the old gentleman's lip.

"You can bet your life I mean it. Are you going to help me or not?"

"Why, I will help you, of course; but I shall not depend on you altogether to find him. I shall call out the police."

"Guess you will find them already out, sir. But, that ain't to the p'int; I want to know where your nephew was going when he left here, what he was going for, and all about it. That will give me somethin' to work on."

"I will tell you without loss of time. He was going to deliver the diamond that I wanted you to deliver yesterday. You see, it was to be cut and polished anew. He set out to take it to one Renaud Serpolet, a lapidary, who lives in a tenement at No. — street."

"That's no seraphic quarter of this village, I'll be bound," commented Dick.

"We knew that the people there were poor, but that is not to say they are dishonest, my lad."

"Oh, not by any means, but maybe somebody got onto the fact that he had that diamond with him, and followed him and laid him out. I have heard of such things here in New York."

"How could any one know he had it?"

"Give it up."

"You were the only one, besides ourselves, who knew anything about it, my lad. But, that signifies nothing."

"No, for I didn't breathe a word about it to anybody. But it won't take a good while to find out whether he reached his destination or not, and I'll soon be back here to report."

"Ha! will you go there and find out?"

"You bet!"

"Excellent! I will patiently wait till you return, then, before troubling the police."

"Just as you please about that, sir."

"If the police get hold of it, it will be in the papers, and that is something I detest—having my name in the papers."

"Well, I'll be back here in the double hitch of hawser and let you know the worst. You keep a stiff upper lip till you see me again, and we'll yank Philip out of his dilemma."

With that, and a wave of the hand, Dick was off.

In due course of time he entered the wretched tenement, and made his way up the ill-savored stairs.

The house was still, and not knowing the location of Serpolet's rooms, he was uncertain where they were. But, he would find them, if there was anybody alive in the house.

Finally he knocked at a door, and after he had knocked two or three times the door was opened on a crack and a volley of the most vociferous French was fired at him, and in the excitement that followed Dick learned the location of the rooms of the Serpolets, and he presented himself at their door, which they had already opened.

CHAPTER V.

WHAT DICK HALF SUSPECTS.

Dock-Boy Dick was glad to find the right place.

Not understanding a word of what the angry French couple said to him, he was glad to escape.

"Are you Serpolet?" he demanded.

"Yes," was the answer. "What do you want with me?"

"I am here on particular business. Will you let me come in for a minute?"

"What is your business?"

"You don't want the whole house to know, do you?"

At that point a woman's voice said something in French, and Dick was asked to step in.

What he beheld was a wretched scene.

There was a woman, who had thrown on a dress loosely, whose hair was done up in rolls and twists with greatest care.

Then there were seven children, in all stages of dress and undress imaginable, who had gotten up from bunks here and there around on the floor, and who were rubbing their eyes.

It was plain that the whole family lived in two rooms, this one and a smaller one adjoining.

And here, too, Serpolet carried on his trade.

"Say, what's the matter with that couple down there?" demanded Dick. "It's a wonder the rest of you folks in the house wouldn't keep them chained up, or else put out a sign warnin' people to beware of 'em."

Serpolet smiled, and his wife broke out into a merry peal of laughter, showing her perfect teeth.

"It's a wonder they didn't rush out at you and fling you down stairs," said Serpolet, who had a good command of English, and only a slight accent. "They are perfect savages. But, what do you want with me?"

"Why, I have come to ask if a young man has been here to-night with a diamond, to have it cut and polished. Seen him?"

"No one has been here," the lapidary answered. "I did not reach home until nearly midnight; have been away. Was any one here to see me, Nannette? I mean besides the two gentlemen."

"What two gentlemen?" demanded Dick.

"I do not know that it concerns you, young sir."

"But, I think it does. Was it an old man and a young one?"

Again they looked at each other.

"The old man was rather stout, and carried his right hand in the breast of his coat," Dick went on. "The younger one

was good-lookin' and both of 'em were well-dressed."

"He must know them," said the woman, aside.

"The old man's name was Belchaine," Dick capped his little climax.

"I see you have knowledge of them," said the lapidary. "They were here to see me, but I was away, as I have said. The old gentleman left his card, and said he would be here about the time of my return, or would come early in the morning."

"And neither one has been here?"

"Do you think any one would be so crazy as to come here so late at night? I shall expect them in the morning."

"Now we are getting down to it, Mr. Serpolet. That young man left his hotel about half-past ten, to come here with that diamond, and he has not returned yet. His uncle is greatly worried about him."

Now the couple looked at each other with something of alarm in their faces, as Dick read their expressions.

"He has not been here," assured the man.

"We have not seen him," supported the woman.

"Then it is strange what has become of him," declared Dick.

"He must have got lost," suggested the lapidary.

"Well, that may be, for he was a stranger in the city; still, he had a tongue and there was no excuse for that."

"It is strange."

"Mighty strange. But, I will find him, if I have to take off my coat to it. By the way, Serpolet?"

"What is it?"

"You know this man Belchaine?"

"Oh, yes."

"What do you know about him?"

"He is a rich gentleman, who used to be in business here in New York, and I used to work for him."

"What was his business?"

"Jewelry. He dealt chiefly in imitation stones."

"Did he ever put any real diamonds in your hands for cutting or polishing?"

"Oh, yes, many a time."

"And he trusted you?"

"Sir! No man ever had reason to distrust Renaud Serpolet!"

"Beg your pardon, Mr. Sapolet. I was getting down to facts, that was all. I have no reason to think any other way about you."

"My reputation is my own capital, and no one must touch that."

"Well, I'll keep hands off, of course. What I was going to say, this diamond that Phil Holland had for you was worth about four thousand dollars."

Yet again the couple looked at each other. But, it was no more than natural they would, perhaps.

"That was the name of the young man?" asked Serpolet.

"Yes."

"Well, he certainly has not been here, sir."

"That settles it, then. I'll go back and report, and then we'll hustle to find him."

"As I hope you will."

Dick took leave, with that, and hurried back to the hotel.

Mr. Belchaine had gone up to his room, but had left word that Dick should come there immediately on his arrival.

Dick was soon at the door of the room.

"Come in," the old gentleman invited.

Dick opened the door and stepped inside.

"No luck," he reported.

"You did not find him!"

"Not even his shadow, sir."

"Heavens! What can it mean?"

"It means that he is in a state of gone-ness, I should say, sir, and we must wade in and find him."

"Had he not been to the house of the lapidary?"

"No, sir."

Dick quickly told all the particulars of his visit there.

"Strange, remarkably strange," mused the old gentleman. "I must notify the police without delay."

"That is the next card to play."

"And I cannot wait for daylight. Do you know where the nearest station is?"

"Like a book, sir."

"Will you come with me there, right away?"

"Be only glad to do it, sir. Am in this thing to win, now, you bet!"

"Then we will set forth immediately."

The old gentleman was soon ready, and together they left the hotel, Dock-boy Dick playing the part of guide.

It was not a great distance to the station, and they were soon there, when the old gentleman stated the case to the officer in charge, and urged him to do all in his power.

As that was all they could do, they returned to the hotel.

Belchaine repaired to his room, and Dick stopped for a word with the clerk, who was awake and interested.

"Hadn't he been there?" the clerk inquired.

"Not a hair of him, unless they lied, and I don't think they did."

"Then what do you think? Come, you have played detective before, Dick; can't you find the fellow?"

"That is what I am going to do, or bu'st."

"How are you going to do it?"

"Give it up. But, I have got my eye on that uncle, and I mean to keep it there."

"That will do you no good."

"Mebby not, Wallie; but I don't cotton to him worth a cent, and what he says don't have the genuine ring to it. In fact, I think there is somethin' crooked about him."

"Pshaw! you are dreaming, boy."

"Well, maybe I am; but if I find Belchaine has been playing roots on Holland, he will have a nightmare, and I'll be the burden of it, you bet!"

CHAPTER VI.

DICK PLAYS A NEAT DODGE.

Dock-Boy Dick was astir bright and early next morning.

He slipped down to the culinary department and made his breakfast on a bowl of steaming coffee and some hot rolls and butter.

When he had done, he felt as good as new, and was none the worse for his loss of sleep. He went up to the reading-room, where he loitered around waiting for Mr. Belchaine to appear.

The man could not go out without being seen, for Dick kept close watch of the office and corridor.

Gradually the house began to assume a busy aspect.

The night and day clerks exchanged places, and Dick went out for a chat with the latter.

While they were talking, Mr. Belchaine came down, his hand out of sight under the breast of his coat, as usual, and he had a worried look upon his countenance.

"You here, young man?" he said to Dick.

"As you see, sir."

"I came to ask the clerk if any word has been had of my nephew."

"There is not a word, sir," informed Dock-boy Dick. "He has not turned up, and no one has seen him."

"Well, it is passing strange. I am almost crazed. I must employ a competent detective immediately, and do everything in my power to find the boy. I hope nothing serious has happened."

"No doubt you will have a police-detective sent to you, sir," said Dick.

" You think so, my boy?"

" Yes."

" Well, I hope he will come soon, that is all. If he does not, I cannot content myself here, I can tell you."

He turned away from them and paced up and down.

" What do you think about him?" asked Dick.

" Seems to take it hard."

" Yes, he seems to."

" Ha! what do you mean, Dick?"

" Mean? Why, that there isn't the genuine ring about his grief."

" You are always finding a mare's nest, Dick."

" Maybe I am, but I can't help it."

" You don't mean to say he is responsible for his nephew's disappearance, do you?"

" Don't know, but I can't help thinkin' there is somethin' that ain't jest up to the scratch."

" Why should he want to harm the young man?"

" Give it up."

Just then a man came up to the desk with a business-like air.

" Joseph Belchaine stopping here?" he asked.

" Yes, sir," said the clerk.

" What room?"

" That is the man, sir, right there."

He pointed the old gentleman out, and with a motion of the hand the man moved away.

" There is your detective, Dick," said the clerk.

" You think so?"

" Bet you ten cents to a dime that's what he is."

" Well, hope so, and I must make it my business to hear what they have to say, if I can."

" Don't see how you will do it."

" I'll show you, if they start for Belchaine's room."

With that, Dick moved away from the desk and was on the alert.

Meantime, the stranger had approached Belchaine and spoken to him politely.

" Mr. Belchaine?"

" Yes, sir."

The old gentleman stopped short and looked at the man searchingly.

" I am a detective, sir, sent here from Police Headquarters to find out what I can about your missing nephew."

" Ha! I am more than glad to see you, sir."

He held out his hand, the left.

" The matter is still fresh, and we may be able to find him," said the detective, taking the proffered hand.

As he spoke, however, he looked in the direction of the man's right hand and seeing this, Mr. Belchaine drew his hand just a little out from under his coat.

" Pardon my left," he said.

" Ha! certainly, sir," assented the detective.

" Will you come up to my room?"

" Yes, and there we can talk with freedom."

" This way, then."

With a motion of the hand, Belchaine led the way in the direction of the elevator, and Dock-boy Dick made haste in the direction of the staircase.

Nothing was said between the two men until they had entered the room and the door had been closed upon them, when Belchaine invited the detective to be seated and took a chair himself.

" Now, then, to business," spoke the detective.

" Exactly, sir; and I want you to put forth every effort to find my nephew. I will handsomely reward you."

" Never mind about that part of it, sir. His name is Philip Holland?"

" Yes."

" Have you a likeness of him?"

" Unfortunately, I have not, sir."

" Describe him."

This Belchaine did, as well as possible, the detective making notes.

" Now, then," said the detective, further, " I want all the particulars about the matter that you can give me."

" I am eager to tell all I can. Question me, sir."

" Had your nephew an enemy here in New York?"

" Not to my knowledge."

" Where is he from?"

" New Orleans."

" What brought him here?"

" He came to see me."

" Tell me all about it, briefly as possible."

" Philip is my sister's child. She is dead. He and I are the only ones of the family living. My sister married a Holland, and they lived in New Orleans. Both are now dead."

" Where do you live?" the detective interrupted.

" Out at —, New Jersey. I was in business here in New York, but retired some years ago."

" What business?"

" Jewelry."

" Go on."

" Well, Philip wrote to me that he was soon to be married, and I wanted to see him before that event took place. His bride-to-be is a lady of French descent, from one of the finest families of France, and I am proud of his choice—"

" You digress, sir."

" No, no; let me tell it my own way. I am the last of the Belchaines, and I desired to arrange some business with Philip so that he would come into my estate if anything happened to me. Not only that, but I wanted to present a fine old heirloom diamond to his bride."

" That diamond has something to do with the present trouble, I believe."

" Yes. It was that that took him out last night. I am sorry that I did not attend to the whole business myself."

" Finish your story, for you were leading up to the story of the diamond, I suppose, of course."

" Yes, I was coming to that. The stone had a flaw, and I wanted to have it recut, for it would then be prettier and more valuable. I met Philip on the arrival of the steamer."

" We came here, and I gave him the diamond, telling him of a man who would be a good one to do the work. We called upon the fellow together, but he was not at home. His wife said he would be at home at eleven o'clock last night, and we decided to wait in the city."

" And at that late hour your nephew went to see him?"

" Yes. You see, his stay with me had to be short, and, if possible, he wanted to have the stone cut and set before he returned. He would not hear of my going with him, but set out alone, and we were to take an early train out to my place this morning. And that was the last seen or heard of the poor fellow."

Belchaine paused, and the detective was thoughtful, while a third person, who was listening, was deeply interested in all that had been said.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SKELETON HAND AGAIN.

Dock-Boy Dick was the third person mentioned.

He had hastened up the stairs, had reached the room first, and was concealed under the sofa.

What his suspicion against Mr. Belchaine was, he could hardly define, but he had an

impression that all was not right, and wanted to get at the bottom of the matter; therefore his interest in this interview.

" What was the value of that diamond, asked the detective.

" Four thousand dollars, or about that."

" Whew! it was a fine one, then."

" Yes, it certainly was that."

" Do you think that lapidary perfectly honest?"

" Oh, yes; I would not suspect him of any crime, least of all of murder."

" You think your nephew has been killed?"

" I certainly hope he has not, but in what other way could any one get the diamond?"

The detective passed the point.

" You say your nephew did not reach his destination, according to what the lapidary said."

" He did not."

" Did any one else know that he had that diamond?"

" No, no one knew it, sir. That is to say, no one but a boy who brought us to this hotel yesterday."

" Ha! maybe we are coming at it."

" At what?"

" Maybe that boy told some one else, and that may explain the whole mystery."

" Then you think—"

" I think nothing, sir. I say maybe it is so; that the boy told some one, and that some one watched for your nephew to relieve him of the gem."

" Then why has he not returned?"

" He may have got a severe knock-out. Maybe he is in one of the hospitals, unconscious."

" Poor Phil! Can't we find out?"

" Yes, we can easily cover that ground. I will have it done. I, myself, am going to see Serpolet."

" You are going to see Serpolet?"

" Yes."

" What for?"

" To satisfy myself that your nephew did not reach there."

" Well, if you are going there I must go with you. I cannot remain here idle any longer."

" You may come along if you want to, sir."

" I will go."

" But, before we start, some other points."

" What are they?"

" Could any one profit by your nephew's death?"

" No one, sir."

" There is no property involved, with which his marriage would interfere?"

" No, sir— And yet— But, hang the property! Find my nephew, and find him alive, is all I ask of you."

" Then there is property, eh?"

" Yes; but why waste time about that? It is the boy I want."

" And you are the one to be benefited should your nephew die before marrying, I take it."

The old gentleman changed color slightly.

" Yes, yes, it would stand that way, if anything should happen; but, God forbid it should ever come to me that way. I want to see Phil married and in happy possession of it all."

" Certainly, sir, that is understood. Don't imagine that I have thoughts any other way. Men who give away four thousand-dollar diamonds are not seeking to over-reach their relations in the matter of property, I should say. Besides, you said you were about to fix your own affairs in your nephew's favor."

" You have it right, sir. But, let us be doing something."

" A few minutes will make little difference. What is the name of your nephew's fiancee?"

" What has that got to do with it?"

" You must telegraph to her."

" What for?"

"To ask if she knows of any danger he might run into. Whether he had a rival who might desire him harm."

"There is a thought, certainly, sir. Her name is Olivie Gueret, and she resides in New Orleans, but that is the nearest I can come to it. I do not know the street address."

"No matter; the police will find her."

"Then you will put them on the case, there?"

"Yes."

"They will alarm her, and perhaps needlessly, although I myself have grave—"

"You have grave what?"

"I was merely thinking of an incident of yesterday."

"Let me have every particular that has even the remotest bearing upon the matter, Mr. Belchaine."

"Well, yes; I will tell you. You see this hand?"

He drew the skeleton hand out from under the front of his coat and held it up.

Dock-boy Dick felt the same thrill of horror that had seized him on seeing the hand the first time, and he noticed that the detective gave a start at sight of it, although he had partly seen it before.

"I see it," the detective said.

"Well, it is the hand of death!"

"The what?"

"The hand of death."

"Yes, I know what you said; I meant to ask you to explain."

"The person who touches this hand, sir, dies within a year, and my nephew was rash enough to grasp it yesterday."

Mr. Belchaine related the whole occurrence.

"Well, I would not lose any sleep over that, sir, if I were you," commented the hard-headed officer. "For my part, I take no stock in it."

"Because you do not know, sir. It has happened more than once, and under circumstances that have convinced me that it is certainly so. I would not have had Phil touch that hand for a fortune."

"And yet you bantered him to do so—"

"No, no, you misunderstand, sir; he was the starter, and I had no intention of letting him touch it."

"Well, I take no stock in it, nor will I, even though harm has come to the young man. If you are ready, we will set out, and I will telephone to the chief from the office."

"I am ready."

Belchaine took up his hat and cane, and together they left the room.

In a few moments thereafter Dock-boy Dick crept from underneath the sofa and executed a fancy step on the carpet.

"I am onto him, right or wrong!" he said to himself. "Maybe I judge him the wrong way because he didn't think me honest, but I hope not. I can't help it, anyhow; that's the feelin' I have got."

He left the room and the hotel.

As soon as possible he was in the neighborhood of Renaud Serpolet's humble domicile.

He arrived upon the ground first, as he aimed to do, and he lost no time in going up to Serpolet's room and knocking.

The door was opened by Mrs. Serpolet.

She had her hair dressed "to the queen's taste," but otherwise she was not very captivating in matter of dress.

But, her eyes were bright, she was good-looking, and she showed her perfect teeth when she smiled a greeting upon Dock-boy Dick, on recognizing him, and she bade him enter.

"You did not knock at the door of the terribles," she said, laughing.

"You bet I didn't," answered Dick. "Has that young man been here yet, Mr. Serpolet?"

"Not a hair of him, my boy."

"Well, it is mighty funny where he can

be, that is all. He certainly intended to come here when he set out."

"But, he did not carry out his intention, you see."

Dick engaged the man and woman in talk, in which the children took some part, and so he idled away the time while he awaited the arrival of Belchaine and the detective.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN INCRIMINATING DISCOVERY.

Dock-Boy Dick had hold upon the right end of the mystery.

This was in line with what he suspected, but he had no means to support his theory.

And certainly he had no proof. There was work to be done, if he hoped to come out ahead in the matter. But, this is anticipating.

After a time there came a knock at the door.

The door was opened by Mrs. Serpolet, who greeted Mr. Belchaine and the detective.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Serpolet!" greeted Belchaine.

"Good-morning!" was the response. "I am pleased to see you, sir."

"Ha! and are you here?" catching sight of Dick.

"You bet!" was the answer. "Come to see if that nephew of yours has got here yet, sir."

"Good for you, my lad. I see you are in earnest."

"That's what I am."

"And he has not been here?" to Serpolet.

"No, sir."

"Well, it is more than strange. He certainly set out to come here."

"And it is quite certain that he did not reach here," supported Mrs. Serpolet, with polite firmness.

"At what time did you retire?" asked the detective.

"After midnight, sir."

"And no one came to your door before that time?"

"Not after Mr. Belchaine and the young man were here, sir," answered the woman.

"And this boy came after you were asleep?"

"Yes," said Serpolet.

"Are you aware how it would look, if it could be shown that he had entered this house?"

The man and wife cast an apprehensive glance at each other.

It was not lost upon the detective.

"But, you could, of course prove what you assert, that he did not reach your door."

"I hope you do not think that we have done him harm, do you?" demanded Serpolet.

Just then Mr. Belchaine stooped and picked something up from the floor, using his skeleton hand in his excitement.

"Ha! what is this?" he cried.

He held the object up.

"I want to know how it came here?" he added, instantly.

The thing he held up was a man's kid glove.

"Your nephew's glove?" asked the detective.

"Yes, my nephew's glove! Tell me how this came here, Serpolet?"

The poor lapidary was pale, and he and his wife looked at each other in a helpless manner.

Dock-boy Dick was taking it all in, and was weighing everything in his own private balance, as it were. His first thought was becoming more firmly rooted.

"I know not how it came here, Mr. Belchaine," the old Frenchman stammered.

"You tell me that, Serpolet?"

"It is true."

"What say you, madam?"

"We know nothing about it," was the denial.

"There is something very funny about it, that is all. I am bound to get at the bottom of this."

"I hope you can, sir," said Serpolet.

"It is possible that he dropped it when he was here," suggested the woman.

"Nonsense," cried Belchaine. "I saw him have his gloves after that, madame. There is something crooked here, as sure as you live, Mr. Detective."

"Where did you pick that up?" asked the detective.

"There, right behind that table leg."

He snatched the glove with his left hand, pointing with the skeleton index of his right.

For the first time, now, attention was attracted to the skeleton hand, and Mrs. Serpolet and the older ones of the children drew back with alarm.

"It might have lain there some time without discovery," commented the detective.

"But, it is one of the very gloves he had when he left me last night," urged the uncle, excitedly.

"Ha! if you are sure of that, it is significant."

"That is what I say."

"But, Mr. Belchaine," cried Serpolet, in alarm, "you know me well enough to know that I would not do a wrong, don't you?"

"I thought I did, Serpolet."

"We have not seen him, I swear it."

"He had a diamond of great value with him," reminded the detective, "and here in your room we find one of his gloves."

"Good heavens, monsieur, do not suspect us!" cried the woman, her good-looking face wearing an expression of consternation. "We truly have not seen the young man, and do not know how his glove came here."

"You swear to that?"

"Yes, yes, we swear it is true," cried they both.

"Only for this glove, Serpolet, I would believe you," assumed Belchaine. "You have been an honest man—or at any rate I have thought you so. But, with this, there is nothing to do but to arrest you."

Mrs. Serpolet and the children began to cry instantly.

"You do not mean it?" cried the lapidary.

"I mean it."

"There is nothing else to be done," decided the detective. "If you are innocent, of course it will be shown in good time."

"And, this place must be searched," urged Belchaine.

"Mr. Belchaine!"

"Can't help it, Serpolet; no chance must be given for the removal of the gem, if you have it here."

"Mr. Belchaine! You, who have trusted many diamonds to my keeping to turn upon me like this and break down my reputation, which is my only capital in the world. You cannot do it."

"It must be cleared up, Serpolet."

Serpolet was perspiring, and his face was the picture of agony.

The little ones were clinging to their mother, and altogether it was a scene not to be forgotten.

Dock-boy Dick was a quiet spectator, and had taken no part in it whatever, further than to give close attention and store away mental notes.

"I have got to do my duty, sir," spoke the detective, grimly, as he produced a pair of handcuffs. "You must hold out your hands and quietly surrender, or I shall have to use force."

The man sunk down on a chair, overcome.

With a quick movement the detective had the handcuffs on his wrists.

"To think that you would do it, Mr. Belchaine, to think that you would do it, sir," the prisoner muttered.

"Yes, to think that you could do it!" cried the wife, springing up in great indignation. "We are poor, sir, but we are above crime. Search our room, sir, and search it well!"

With her head thrown slightly back, her eyes flashing, and her carefully arranged hair lending an air of dignity, she looked like a tragedienne.

Besides, it all added a charm to her natural beauty.

She waved her hand as she spoke, indicating that the search was to include every nook and corner.

"Yes, it is our painful duty," asserted Belchaine. "It must be done, and if any further evidence is discovered, the law will demand of you an explanation."

"Which it must do, anyhow," said the detective.

They began looking about the room, in every likely place where a valuable of so small size might be put, but they did not find it.

"Keep on!" the woman urged them. "Do not give it up. If it is here you will surely find it. Search everywhere. Search our persons, if you want to go so far. We want you to be satisfied."

"Yes, yes, look well!" supported Serpolet.

But they were doing that. They looked into places likely and unlikely.

Finally the detective was heard to utter an exclamation, and he held up to the light, between thumb and finger, a sparkling gem.

He had picked it out of a tin can that stood on a corner of the frame of one of the wheels used by the lapidary in his work, in which were some odds and ends of one thing or another of little value.

CHAPTER IX.

DOCK-BOY DICK'S SPEECH.

DOCK-BOY DICK, as said, had been a close observer.

Nothing had escaped his eye, and now his eyes flashed with something of the fire of his nature.

Madame Serpolet blanched at the discovery, and Serpolet himself stared like one suddenly confronted by a ghost. It was a striking picture for the moment.

"Ha! it is the very diamond!" cried Belchaine, leaping forward and reaching for it with his skeleton hand, as if altogether forgetful of his deformity in the excitement of the moment.

"Hold on!" interposed the detective, waving him back.

"But, I say it is the diamond!"

"Can you prove it, sir?"

"Yes, yes, if you will let me have it. There is a flaw in it, which it was our intention to—"

"A flaw? Excellent! That will enable us to decide."

"Yes, a flaw. I can show it to you in a second."

"If it is the same diamond," suggested Dock-boy Dick, very coolly.

The man turned upon him instantly.

"What do you mean?" he cried.

"I mean that you are pretty certain about the diamond before you have had it in your fingers."

"But, I have seen it thousands of times, boy! I recognize the light, its size, and can hardly be mistaken. But, we shall soon see."

"I haven't any doubt about its being the same one, sir."

Belchaine looked at him keenly.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, irritably.

"I suppose you ought ter know it, sir."

"Well, yes, I think so. But, we have a means of proving it."

"You need not show me," said the detective, now finding chance to speak. "Describe the flaw."

This the old gentleman did, minutely.

"It is the same diamond, then," averred the officer.

"And how came it there?" cried Belchaine. "Serpolet, I demand of you, how came it there?"

"I do not know," was the answer. "It is all a mystery to me, Mr. Belchaine. I will swear that I never saw either the glove or the diamond till this minute."

"You will have to prove it," said the detective.

"Do you think, sirs, that we would put a diamond in such a place as you found this in?" cried the woman. "And would we have left a glove on the floor to betray us, if we had done evil?"

"No telling what you would have done. Who would think of looking in such a place for a diamond worth its thousands? You could not have chosen a better spot, all things considered."

"But, the diamond is nothing," said Belchaine, suddenly. "I care nothing for that; I want my nephew. Where is he?"

"We do not know."

"What! You still dare to tell this?"

"We dare to insist upon the truth, sir," rejoined the woman. "Would you next accuse us of murder?"

"Ha! do you note the word she uses?" demanded Belchaine. "Madame, you had better make a clean breast of this whole matter, I tell you."

"We had nothing to conceal, and have nothing to tell."

"See here, Serpolet?"

"Well?"

"Will you still insist that you are innocent?"

"Yes, to the death!" was the response. "I know not how these things came here, Mr. Belchaine."

"Nothing remains but to call a policeman and have the man taken to the station-house," suggested the detective. "We will then continue our investigation further."

"Yes, for my nephew must be found," urged the uncle. "Boy, you run down and call an officer, will you?"

"You do your own running," snapped Dick.

"Why, what do you mean?" demanded the man, in greatest amaze. "Can it be that you are in collusion with these people?"

Dick gave a start; this was something that had not occurred to him.

It could be made to look suspicious against him, perhaps, if any one pressed that view.

"No, I ain't in collusion with anybody," was the retort, "but I'm 'fraid I'm likely to be in collision with somebody before this thing comes to a wind-up, and if I do there is going to be trouble."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say."

"But, you shall explain, young fellow."

"Mebby you can make me."

"This insolence to me, a man of my years! I not only can, but will, make you explain."

"When are you going to begin?"

"Now; at once! You are the only one who knew Phillip had that diamond in his possession, and when we came here, here you were, talking with these people in a very familiar manner."

"Yes, and I was talkin' business, too," retorted Dick. "I set out to find Phil Holland, and I am goin' to find him or break a trace, and don't you forget it! I have got a clue, too, and I think I will get there all in good shape if nothin' breaks."

The old man looked at the lad in a curious manner.

"What do you think about this youth?" he asked the detective.

"I think there is ground for suspecting him, sir."

"Guess you don't know me, do ye?" cried Dick.

"Now you have got me," was the rejoinder.

"My acquaintanceship is not very extensive, among the lower classes."

"Well, if it ain't, it orter be," asserted Dick.

When excited, or aroused, he fell into his boyhood manner of speaking, out of which he was gradually lifting himself.

"Why had it ought to be, sir?"

"Any detective what amounts to much has a purty good spread in that direction. And, what's more, didn't you come from there yourself?"

"No, I did not. Mr. Belchaine, I shall make this arrest."

"Yes; I think I would, sir."

A satisfied look came into the uncle's face.

"I think I wouldn't, if I was you," Dick demurred. "Say, ever hear of Dock-boy Dick?"

"What? You are not Dock-boy Dick?"

"Was when I started into this thing, any how."

"This puts a new face upon the matter, Mr. Belchaine."

"How's that? What do you mean?"

"This young fellow is something of a detective himself, sir."

Dock-boy Dick noted that a queer expression came over the face of the old man, and that he scowled.

"A detective? A youth of his years?"

"If he is the person he claims to be, sir, he has done some excellent work."

"Ha! but he is the person?"

"He says so. I have never met him before, myself."

"Then I would arrest him anyhow, for he may be lying to you. I mean to take no chance."

"Don't be in a hurry," said Dick, "I want to make you a little speech, 'fore you go the full limit with me."

"What have you to say?"

"I want to tell Serpolet, here, and his wife, that I believe they are innocent in this matter, and that I am going to prove them so if I can."

Dick was now the central figure, and every eye was upon him.

"Bless you for those words!" cried the woman. "Whatever our faults, we are honest. That is one reason we are poor!"

This last she exclaimed, with eyes upon Belchaine.

"What mean you, hussy?" cried the old man.

"That honest people seldom grow rich, that is all."

"Officer, arrest her, too," cried the old gentleman, in a passion. "I will step down for the police, and we will take them all."

"All but me," cried Dock-boy Dick. "Keep a stiff upper lip, Serpolet, and I will pull you out of your fix or bu'st. I have got my eye focused on the dark spot, an' I think I'll hit it when I shoot. Tra-la-la, folks; see you later maybe, if the big boori don't gobble me up. Ta-ta!"

He was nearest the door, and he opened it suddenly and was gone.

CHAPTER X.

DICK IN A DISGUISE.

Dock-Boy Dick knew what he was talking about.

It was with good reason that he told Serpolet and his wife that he believed them innocent.

What that reason was we will not stop here to explain, but it was sufficient, and he believed that he would be able to fulfill all that he had promised.

He made his way out of the house with haste, for he was afraid to take the chances of arrest. If it came to that it might throw him off the track, although there was no danger to himself.

He dodged around the corner and was gone.

But, it was not for long. He was soon back again where he could watch the house.

A change had taken place in his appearance, however, and no one would take him for the same youth, unless it might be after a close scrutiny. He had put on a neat mustache.

Not only so, but he had put his soft batin his pocket, and now wore a cap.

These changes he often made, both to puzzle his friends and to serve for a disguise when that was needed.

He now had on a steamship cap that he had picked up somewhere, and it gave him the aspect of a natty young middy ashore for a little while to see the sights.

"I am gettin' there," he said to himself. "There is a nigger in the hedge as big as a barrel, and I am goin' to have him out of there. Some crooked job has been put up against Phil Holland, and I know it. He was a brick, and I'll show him that I don't forget a good word."

Meantime, no sooner had he left the room than Belchaine said:

"I believe that scamp had something to do with it, and that he is not the lad he claimed to be!"

"It looks bad for him, considering everything else," answered the detective. "But, if he is really Dock-boy Dick, make up your mind that he is all right, and if it is possible to find your nephew he will find him."

"But, I don't believe in him. Too bad he got away."

"Well, he got away."

"True enough. I'll get the policeman, if you will guard the prisoners."

"And I can do that. Go ahead!"

Belchaine left the room, and the detective said to Serpolet:

"Now, the best thing you can do is to make a clean breast of this whole business, my man."

"There is nothing to make clean," the prisoner protested.

"You still insist that you are innocent?"

"I swear it."

"Yes, we swear it!" echoed the wife.

"And that boy had nothing to do with you. Did he not inform you about the diamond?"

"He did not."

"Well, you can see how it looks for you. There is nothing to be done but to arrest you, but if what you say is true, you may be able to prove it and get clear all right."

"We don't blame you, sir."

"I am glad of that."

"It ain't your fault; you have to do your duty."

"Glad you see it as it is, and if that fellow was Dock-boy Dick, you need not worry a great deal, if you are indeed innocent."

"And we have sworn that we are."

"Yes."

"And why are we not to worry?"

"Because, I will find that lad and will get out of him what he knows, and with that information I may be able to get you out of your bad situation."

"If you can find the lad."

"Yes, if I can."

"And must we both go to prison?" asked the woman, crying.

"Yes, under the circumstances there is no other way. But, your oldest child here can look after the little ones."

They talked on in this manner until the return of Belchaine, who brought with him a couple of policemen.

The detective showed them his badge.

"What charge?" was asked.

"Suspected of having had something to do with the disappearance of a man by name of Holland."

"All right."

"Use them well, understand. They may be innocent."

"May be innocent?" demanded Belchaine.

"Certainly."

"With all the proof we have against them?"

"They certainly are not guilty until proven so, sir," rejoined the detective.

"Oh, certainly not!"

"And that is what I mean."

"Then take good care that they do not escape," urged the old gentleman. "If they have any knowledge of what has become of my dear nephew, they must be made to disclose it."

Mrs. Serpolet was allowed to touch up her hair a little, after which she put on the best she had, which was bad enough, and was ready.

The pair kissed their children all around, and left the room in the keeping of the officers.

There was a great crying among the several children, of course.

When the prisoners had been taken, the detective and Belchaine questioned the children closely, but nothing could be learned.

They had slept soundly, for the most part, and not one dropped a word that was in any manner incriminating against their parents. Nor did further search of the rooms reveal anything.

Finally Belchaine and his man took leave.

The other tenants of the crowded tenement were all agog, and eyed them as they passed out.

"Well, it is passing strange," declared Belchaine. "I know not what to make of it. Here we have found Philip's glove, and the diamond, and still the couple say they have not seen him."

"They are innocent, or mighty good liars, that is certain."

"And which do you think?"

"I shall not decide for or against till I have proofs. I am after the facts in the case."

"And a good plan. Whatever you do, sir, make sure that you find the boy. I am almost crazed with the thought that he may have been murdered."

"I hope such is not the case."

"I fear the worst."

"Why?"

"Have we not found that he was robbed? And he has not returned, which is a proof positive that something has happened to him."

"We will be able to hear from the hospitals, soon."

"Yes, that must be seen to at once."

They went along, and a shadower was upon their track. That shadower was no other than Dock-boy Dick,

"Well, he has done his little worst," said Dick to himself, when he set out to follow them. "I have pretty good eyes and ears, and I use 'em, too. Bet a red herrin' I land my man 'fore we get done."

He followed them to the police station, and thence to the hotel.

Seeing they were about to enter, Dick dodged in ahead of them by another entrance.

When they approached the clerk's desk he was on hand to hear what was said, and so well did he play his part that he was not detected, or even suspected.

"Has my nephew returned?" asked Belchaine.

"No, sir," the response.

"And no word from him?"

"Not a word."

"What are we to do?" turning to the detective.

"I do not see that you can do anything further, sir," was the answer. "You may as well remain right here. I will get down to work on the case, and will report to you as soon as I have anything to report."

"Well, I suppose I must accept it so, but it is trying to have to remain idle when the fate of my nephew is unknown. I

would give all. I am worth in the world, had he not touched this fatal hand yesterday."

As he spoke, he held up to sight his skeleton hand.

CHAPTER XI.

DICK DISAPPOINTED.

Dock-Boy Dick felt the same thrill of horror as on the other occasions upon which he had seen the skeleton hand.

And, no wonder for it was a sight to shock any one. It looked, indeed, like a veritable hand of death. Dick was not the only one who experienced a feeling of horror.

The detective recoiled a step, and the clerk of the house paled.

"For heaven's sake put that hand out of sight, sir!" the latter exclaimed. "It gives me the creeps."

"I would that I could put it away from me altogether," sighed the old gentleman, as he thrust it again under the breast of his coat.

"If I were you I would have it cut off," declared the detective, emphatically. "Never had anything to give me such a turn in my life, as that hand of yours does, sir. A dead man, or a skeleton in fact, would not affect me half so much."

"You would have it cut off?" cried Belchaine. "Oh, no, you would not, for I have the use of it nearly as well as the other. You see, the muscles—"

"No, no! Keep it out of sight, sir!"

Others around were interested, but with a smile Belchaine thrust it further out of sight and did not expose it again.

"But, why do you call it a fatal hand, sir?" asked the clerk.

"Because, the man who grasps it dies within a year."

"Get out!"

"I have known it to happen more than once, and that's why I said I would give all I am worth if my nephew had not touched it yesterday."

"Then, he did touch it?"

"Not only touched it, but clasped it heartily and shook it. Poor Phil!"

"Why did you let him do that?"

"He did it without my letting. It was sheer rashness on his part, for he knew well enough the story of the skeleton hand."

With that Mr. Belchaine walked away.

He had said enough, as he evidently thought. And he had, enough to draw a reporter after him.

The detective followed him as he moved away, and Dick went after them, but in a manner not to draw attention to himself. The reporter, however, noticed him, and spoke to him.

"Know that party?" he asked.

Reporters have worn the word "party" threadbare, by the way.

"Do you know him?" repeated Dick.

"No, that's the reason I asked you."

"Well, who are you?"

"Who are you?"

"A boy around town, that's all."

"And I'm another, so give us your hand on it."

The fellow's manner was so frank that Dick could not refuse with good grace, so he gave his hand.

"Know anything about the man and his hand?" the reporter grinned.

"Yes, some, and I am going to know more. Say, I will give you a tip, if you won't give me away."

"What is it?"

"You won't tell?"

"Honor bright, as the urchins say."

"Well, there is a mystery about that man, and I suspect that the police are after him."

"Ha! is that so?"

"I am guessing at it, but there is something wrong somewhere."

"How do you know there is?"

Dick told him just enough, then, to awaken his interest, and to put him on the scent of news. He had dropped to Dick the fact of his being a reporter.

Meantime the two men were talking earnestly.

Presently the detective took his leave, and as soon as the coast was clear the reporter rushed up to Mr. Belchaine.

Dick had mentioned to the reporter that he wanted to hear the story, too, if he could, and the newsgatherer had promised to give him the opportunity if it could be worked around that way.

"Mr. Belchaine?" the reporter asked.

"Yes, sir; and who are you?"

"Here is my card, sir. I am a reporter to the *Morning Moon*."

"Ah! then it is news you are after?"

"Yes. I have heard something about your missing nephew—"

"Ah! what have you heard?"

"No, no; you misunderstand, sir. I meant to say that I have heard something about his strange disappearance, and I would like to have the whole story from your own lips for my paper."

"I hoped that you had information for me," sadly.

"No, not that; wish I had."

"And the more so do I."

"Shall we sit down just here?" indicating a settee in an out-of-the-way corner."

Belchaine had no objections, and there they sat down.

In ten seconds Dick was behind them, on the opposite of the settee, hidden by its high back.

"Yes, it is a fatal hand," he heard Belchaine saying. "I don't mind telling you something about it, but not for publication, of course. You can believe that it is painful to me."

"I can appreciate that, sir."

"No less than half a dozen instances can I mention where death has followed the touching of this hand. It looks just what it is. And now, to think that my well-beloved nephew would meet the same fate—"

"Then you have little hope that he will be found alive?"

"Scarcely any, sir. My belief is that the Serpents murdered him for that diamond, and the money he had with him. But, you have heard the story?"

"Only a mere outline, from the police."

"I will tell you in full, then."

And so he did, and Dock-boy Dick was as much interested as the young newspaper representative, if not, indeed, more so.

In one or two little points there were departures from the facts as he knew them, and this strengthened the suspicion he already had against Belchaine. But, perhaps he had a short memory.

While they were talking, another man passed along in front of the settee several times.

Dick heard him, but could not see him.

At last this man passed around on Dick's side, and looked at him.

Dick was pretending to be asleep, with his cap well down over his eyes, but he was far from being so.

He saw the man, saw him look at him, and watched him as he passed on, though he did not stir. And the thought came to him that the man would bear watching.

He did not know why he thought so.

Undoubtedly it was because the man had taken such a keen look at him.

Presently the reporter took his leave, and Dick saw his suspect coming that way, now with more briskness in his step.

Dick remained the same, and heard the man speak to Belchaine.

"Weather?" he said, simply.

"Clear," was the response.

"Good!" the rejoinder. "Go to your room?"

"If you desire, but better talk right here; not attract attention, then."

Dock-boy Dick pricked up his ears, at this, as can be imagined. What meant such talk as this?

But, he was destined to disappointment.

"Ears close by!" informed the stranger, in lower tone. "Let's move to another seat."

"Where are ears?" asked Belchaine.

"Just behind us."

"All right; we'll move."

"Seems to be asleep, but may not be. Cannot take any chances, now."

Together they got up and walked to another settee some distance away, where they sat down again.

Dock-boy Dick was not "in it" now. And so great was his chagrin that he felt like kicking himself all around the corridor, as if that would do him any good.

He remained where he was for some time, and then finally got up, as if just awaking out of a nap, and stretching himself, sauntered away out of sight from where the two men sat.

CHAPTER XII.

TOUCHING BOTTOM.

Dock-Boy Dick was not pleased with his progress.

Still, he felt that he had hold on the right end of the matter, and that he was on the winning side.

"True, there was little to encourage him, save the fact that he had all confidence in his ability to cope with the difficulty. There was much to be done, if he hoped to succeed.

"Too bad that a feller can't have it all his own way," he muttered to himself. "What you read in stories, about the detective happening to be in the right place at the right time to hear the right thing said, don't hold good in my case. But, maybe I am no detective."

He agreed with himself that that was probably the fact.

"Or if I am, I ain't one of that kind," he reflected further. "Here these two men are no doubt talkin' the most important part of the whole business, and I can't get a word of what they are saying. It is enough to make a stone statue shed briny weeps, hang me if it isn't. But, it will be your inning after a while, Dock-boy, maybe. Keep a stiff upper lip."

He made a change in his disguise.

Having done that, he took up his station where he could watch the two men at a distance.

Finally they got up and shook hands, Belchaine using his left hand for the service, of course, and they parted company and the stranger passed out of the hotel and went away.

Dock-boy Dick went after him, cautiously.

Dick had practiced long enough to become a perfect shadower, and there was little risk of discovery.

He observed good distance, and his mind was fully made up that he would not lose sight of his suspect. He meant to know who this man was, and as much about him as possible.

Particularly, what business he and Belchaine had with each other.

Dick was, as said, disguised.

The man passed up the cross street to Broadway, thence north for a little distance, when he turned over toward the east side of town.

Certain portions of the city, in that direction, are not savory.

Particularly was this true of the one into which this stranger penetrated, as Dock-boy Dick knew.

The man, by the way, was not a bad-looking fellow, and was well dressed, but had

the stamp of the ward "heeler" about him in a way not to be mistaken. He was not a high society man by any means.

Finally, in a low quarter, this man met two others.

These were a pair of veritable toughs, as the dock-boy detective knew the moment he saw them.

They were roughly clad, and had the swagger of villains of their class.

Stopping, some words were exchanged among the trio, when the pair of rascals wheeled around and went the other way, the stranger following him. A stranger he was, to Dick, but not to these men or to the city.

At last, they entered the open doors of a livery stable.

Dock boy Dick was on hand in a jiffy, as he might have expressed it, and slipped in by another door.

No one observed him.

Dick saw at a glance that he had a clear field, with an advantage over the others.

They had entered by what was undoubtedly the business entrance of the place. The door by which Dick had entered was on the opposite side of two main doors, by which carriages passed out and in.

The door by which Dick had entered was one little used.

In the center of the low, wide building, was a line of carriages; a double line, in fact.

On the other side were a number of men, some at work, but the most of them idle and talking, and they were too busy to take notice of Dick. But, then, he had entered silently.

Of the men mentioned, the three who had just entered were a part.

Dick saw at once that the well-dressed man was no stranger here, but that he was on friendly terms with all.

They called him "Boss."

Dick dodged under one of the carriages, and was between the two lines, where discovery was not likely to happen.

The "Boss" talked for a few minutes with all the men, about matters of interest to them, but of no moment to the reader, and then the trio passed along further into the stable.

Back there it was semi-darkness, a gas-jet burning only here and there, at long distances apart.

It was daylight without, but it would have been total darkness, or nearly so, here, without the gas.

"Well, Boss, what is ther word?" asked one of the men.

"I have got your money for you, Hop," was the answer.

"Then he came down, did he, Boss?" observed the other.

"Well, you can bet he came down, Bat!" was the assurance.

"And he will come down more?" Hop wanted to know.

"If nothing happens."

The two fellows laughed, and the "Boss" clapped them both on the shoulders.

"Have you fed the caged rat?" he asked.

"Oh, yes; he has been fed," was assured. "He is a little wild, yet, but he will come around all right, you bet!"

"Bound to be a little wild at first in every such case. Rats don't like to be cornered, you knw. But, you have not let him get a hint as to where he is, and of what it means, have you?"

"Well, rather not."

"That is right. I will attend to that."

"But, our money?"

"Yes, here it is, Bat. You are not the one to overlook that."

Dock-boy Dick, having now gained a position as near as he dared to approach, saw money counted out.

An equal amount was paid to each of the two rascals and they pocketed it.

Dick could hardly contain himself.
"If I ain't onto you, it's funny!" he said to himself. "And if I don't get onto you still harder, it will be funnier still. I will get my knee on your wishbone and my fingers in your gullick before you know it, speakin' figuratively."

He certainly believed that he was on the right track now.

That the person referred to as the "rat" was the missing Holland, he felt no doubt.

"Now," said the one called "Boss," "you are to take care that the prisoner does not get out of your hands, and I will attend to the rest."

"There has got to be more money, you understand, Boss Gluker," insisted the fellow called "Bat."

"Certainly, Bat; that is understood."

"Bat is right," put in the other. "We only agreed to do one job for this sum, you know."

"I say that is understood, Hop Keelough," the ringleader urged. "You do what I say, and you will not lose anything by it."

"All right."

"And now I will leave you. Not likely I'll want you right away, but keep under touch in case I do want you."

"Yes, one of us will be here or at the other place all the time. But, what is the racket you are goin' to work for more of the good, Boss?"

"That does not concern you; you will get a share of it all right."

"Then you can't trust us?"

"Why, I can trust you, of course, but what's the use? You can't work it without me, that's certain."

"And could you work it at all if it hadn't been for us?"

"Oh, I know lots of other men."

"But, none who have served ye more faithful, I'll be bound," declared Bat.

"Well, maybe not. All there is of it, it can be played on the old fellow that the rat is alive and likely to escape, and we can do what we please with him."

"Bully!" exclaimed Hop. "We'll see you through with it, Boss!"

"That's all I want, boys."

"Goin'?"

"Yes, will be off, now. See you later."

And with that the ringleader shook hands with the evil pair and went away.

No sooner had he gone than they looked at each other, grinned, and took their money out of their pockets to look at it.

They counted it, looked at each other and grinned again, and shook hands, as if they had such a good thing between themselves that they found it hard to contain their exuberance of joy.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE HANDS OF THE FOE.

Dock-Boy Dick had his curiosity fully awakened, now.

As said, he believed firmly that he was upon the right track, and that the prisoner was Holland.

For the same reason that he had dropped Belchaine to follow "Boss" Gluker, he now dropped that worthy to keep an eye upon his tools for a time.

He felt that he was getting where the scent was warm, and he did not mean to lose the trail if possible to prevent it. He was a veritable sleuth, with a good deal of bulldog tenacity.

Just now he was eager to know what was between these two.

"We are top-side up with care, eh, Hop?" spoke Bat.

"You kin bet we are!" exclaimed Hop.

"An' we mean to stay there, too."

"I think we do, if the wheels stay on."

"And the Boss will dance to our tune."

"You have hit it right."

"That what you was thinkin' about?"

"Yes; and you?"

"Sure."

"Funny the same thing came to us both at once."

"Nothin' funny about it. It was a thing we wasn't likely to let slip by not thinkin' about et."

"Well, mebby not."

Dock-boy Dick was eager for them to say more than this.

What he wanted was to get right down to the meat of the matter, and learn the inner secrets.

"Wish they would spit it right out," he said to himself. "But, that is the way it happens in stories. It ain't so in real life, I guess. But, mebby I ain't one of the lucky detectives."

"I say, Bat?"

After a moment of silence.

"Well, Hop?"

"How do you mean to work it, Bat?"

"Same as the Boss, only more so."

"And what plan has he got?"

"Where's your head?"

"Here."

He indicated where, and the other laughed.

"I mean, where's what's in it?"

"Well, I s'pose it is in it yet, fer all I know."

"Then, why can't you remember what the Boss's plan is? Plain enough."

"Well, tell me again, then."

"He will keep the fellow alive, and will threaten the old party with him, and so get more money."

"Yes, that is what I wanted to get at. And our scheme?"

"We will lose the fellow, accidentally on purpose, and will demand about a cool thousand to find him again."

"Ha, ha, ha! That is about the size of it, and I take it that it is a cute game."

"Yes, take it all around, it is."

"And I am in it," said Dock-boy Dick, in thought. "Count me right there, my pair of beauties, and if I don't make it interesting for you I will eat my hat. You are my mice, you bet!"

"Well, shall we go?" asked Bat.

"Yes," agreed Hop.

They had put their money carefully away, and each had a very satisfied look upon his face.

Turning, they made as if to go straight to the door, but their eyes met, they understood, and immediately they dodged under one of the vehicles in the row and made for the other side.

On that side their exit was not likely to be noticed.

Dock-boy Dick was just in the act of turning, to follow them down to the doors and thence out, when they made the move described.

The young detective knew instantly what to expect.

There was no chance of turning, however, and less for getting out of the way. Before he could escape they were upon him.

"Hello!" exclaimed Hop, under his breath.

"What the mischief!" exclaimed Bat.

Even as they spoke they seized hold upon Bob, and he was helpless in their hands.

"Who are you?" demanded Bat.

"What's that to you, hard nut?" the rejoinder.

"I'll show you, if you don't watch out who you're callin' names."

"You are no goody-goody, I'll be bound."

"Look here, was you listenin' to us?"

"What do ye take me fer?"

"What are you doin' here, anyhow?"

"You won't give a feller away?"

"We'll see about that."

"I have been asleep in here, and meant to sneak out."

They had spoken in low tones, all of them, and Dick thought the others had as lief not be heard.

"You have been asleep here?" repeated Hop.

"Yes."

"I don't believe it."

"Can't help that."

"An' I don't believe it, either," declared Bat. "He was listenin'; that's what he was up to."

"Must think I have got nothin' better to do," sneered Dick. "When I take to listenin', it will be where I will hear somethin'. What do I care what fellers like you say?"

But, that did not lessen their hold upon him.

They had a tight grip, and he knew it would be useless to struggle, which would only add to their suspicions against him.

"How long was you asleep?" asked Hop.

"You mean, how long has he been awake?" corrected Bat.

"Yes."

"Just woke up," asseverated Dick.

Perhaps he had, to the fact that he was in a fix.

"And you didn't hear anything we said?"

"I heard you laffin' and talkin', an' mebby that was what wakened me, but I didn't waste no time listenin'."

Dick had to talk to suit the occasion, and he did not hesitate to stretch the truth a little.

It was just light enough there for him to see the faces of the two men, and he saw them look at each other as they held him fast.

"What say?" demanded Bat.

"There is a risk."

"You are right."

"Shall we take it?"

"I say not."

"That settles it."

"What then?"

"I'll show you."

With that, the last speaker clapped a hand over Dick's mouth.

He also tightened his grip upon him with the other hand, and his pal in dark deeds did the same.

"Now, fetch him this way," whispered Hop, hoarsely.

He indicated with a jerk of the head the rear part of the stable, and together they dragged their prisoner along that way.

Dick now struggled all he could, but to no use, for he would have been no match for one of these fellows alone, and he had both of them to oppose.

In spite of his struggles he was taken along down the narrow passage between the two rows of wagons of divers sorts, until they came to an open space near the extrem rear.

Here they stopped.

"Kin ye hold him?" demanded Hop.

"Should smile ef I couldn't. But, better gag him so's he can't let out a yell, hadn't ye?"

This suggestion was accepted and carried into effect, and when Dick had been gagged, Hop left him for the moment in the hands of his accomplice, and turned and opened a trap in the floor.

CHAPTER XIV.

DICK'S CLEVER DEAL.

Dock-Boy Dick felt a thrill of horror.

It was not the same feeling he had experienced upon seeing the skeleton hand, but one of a different sort.

And, strange as it seemed to him, for the mind can do a wonderful lot of thinking in a few brief seconds, when imminent danger threatens, he cast about in mind to recall whether he had touched the skeleton hand.

He could not remember that he had done so.

To touch that hand, as he had heard its owner say, was death within the year, and hence the thought.

There was, however, little time for reflection.

As soon as the trap-door had been opened, Hop Keelough turned back again and seized Dick by the feet.

"Now," he said to Dugan.

They lifted him and carried him to the open.

"Goin' to throw him in?" Dugan asked in guarded tone, glancing around.

"Yes, and quick about it, before we are seen," answered Keelough. "Steady, now, and let him go."

They stooped, and for one brief second Dick was suspended over the darksome hole. The next moment they let go their hold of him, and down he went, into a pit of utter darkness.

The next instant they had closed the trap door.

Looking about them, to see if any one had observed their crime, and feeling assured that they had not been seen, they left the spot.

Taking that side of the double row of vehicles that was darkest, and where the employees of the stables had little call, they made their way to the front, and as it happened, left the stable unseen.

"Well, that was neat done," said Dugan.

"You bet," agreed Keelough. "Almcst as neat as the other."

And thus talking, they made their way off, and Dock-boy Dick was effectually disposed of.

To return to him.

When he felt the men let go, he certainly thought that it was all up with Dock-boy Dick.

Then the awful feeling of falling, and the terrible sensation of the result, in anticipation, for, brief as the time was, he had time enough to consider it all, and to spare.

It seemed a long time to him, the time he was going down, down!

Really, it was but a moment.

He had struck the bottom long before the trap was closed overhead, and, as we have seen, that was closed immediately.

He struck without a sound.

Somehow he had turned so that he came down on his feet, and striking upon something soft, he toppled over and rolled to the bottom of a sloping pile.

He understood it all in a moment. He was in a pit used for the disposal of the manure of the stables, which, from time to time, as he afterward learned, could be removed at the rear of the stables.

"Well, here is a pretty mess," he said to himself. "If there is anything in hero detective stories like this, I would like to see it. They always fell into the right place at the right time, but I be hanged if that is my luck. Phil Holland can be dead and buried 'fore I can do him any good."

He gathered himself up and looked around.

At first all was total darkness, but presently he thought he saw a streak of light at his left hand.

He had taken the gag out of his mouth, having the use of his hands, and he expressed his disgust and indignation aloud in words of no nice choosing, for he was in no mood for delicacy.

"I am a confounded lunkhead!" he cried. "A feller with a grain of sense would never have got into such a fix as this. I orter 'a' cut an' run fer it, before they got hold of me; and I could 'a' done it, too, if I had kicked that feller Dugan a bat in the gob when he crept under the couch."

What he said was something of a play upon the fellow's name.

But, this was what he thought now; at the time of it he had been taken without warning, and did not think.

He moved over to where the ray of light shone through.

It came through a crack, and that crack was where a swinging door opened out upon a sort of dugway behind the building.

No one was in sight, but there were a couple of carts, showing how the manure was taken out. He tried the door, but it was fast, and when he had felt all around he discovered that this door was the only outlet.

To this time he had not thought to try his lungs.

He now shouted a call for help.

"T'underashun!" he heard an exclamation close at hand. "Who dhe devil is that?"

The voice came from the direction of the door that opened upon the dugway.

"Hello! is that you, Mike?" asked Dick.

He guessed at the name.

"No, it isn't me Mike, but it's me, Pat," was the response.

"Well, let me out of here, will you, Pat?"

"And who are ye, Oi'm askin'?"

"A friend in a fix."

"Oi should say ye was dhe last, an' ye are in dhat swate place."

"Let me out."

"How came ye dhere?"

"Was thrown in."

"Bah! go 'long wid yez."

"That is just what I want to do, Pat, if you will only open this trap and let me out."

"Well, it is no fool ye are, anyhow, Oi'll be bound. Dhat same Oi will, an' me name is Pat Reilley."

Dick waited silently.

He heard the man fumbling at the door on the outside, and then of a sudden the door was lifted and the light poured in.

The Irishman was a pleasant-faced fellow of forty years or so.

He looked at Dick with even more interest than Dick looked at him, and his face showed his surprise.

"Ye don't m'ane to be tellin' me dhat ye was t'rowed in dhis hole, do ye?" he demanded.

"I wouldn't lie about it, Pat."

"An' who t'rowed ye in?"

"Two of the stable-boys."

"Bad sis to dhem! Phwat did dhey do dhat fur?"

"For a joke, I suppose."

"A dhrity joke, Oi should say."

"Well, yes, rather," and Dick brushed his clothes as best he could.

"It must been dhat ye was pokin' y're nose phwere ye had no business to be pokin' a'r it," Pat suggested.

"Well, maybe they thought so, but I was lookin' for two friends of mine."

"Two friends?"

"Yes."

"And who were dhey?"

"Do you know Boss Gluker?"

"Oi should smoile an' Oi didn't."

"Well, he sent me here to find these friends, and I am the boss's friend from the word go."

"Oh-ho! Oi see."

"And when I asked for them some of the boys thought I was fooling."

Dick had a ready flow of fiction, when occasion demanded, and he had it on tap just now.

But, there was an object behind it all.

He meant to make capital out of his misfortune, if possible, and he hoped it would be possible.

"Did yo tell dhem dbe boss sent ye?" asked the Irishman.

"They didn't give me time. They said they would put me in the cooler till Dugan and Keelough came."

"And they wur dbe wans ye wanted to see?"

"Exactly."

"You have a ready tongue, me lad, and Oi am inclined to think that it got away wid ye to a degree, and dhat was phwat got ye into trouble. If it is Dugan and Keelough ye do be wantin', Oi can tell ye phwere ye will find them."

Eureka! The very point Dick had been working to attain.

CHAPTER XV.

DICK IN A DARK DEN.

Dock-Boy Dick felt like dancing with delight.

He could have hugged the Irishman, but prudence constrained him. It would not do to let his exultation be noticed.

"Well, maybe you are right, Pat," he said. "I know I am a little quick with my lip sometimes, and I guess I did talk a little more than was good for me. But, it was all in fun."

"Av coarse, but some folks don't like fun av that sort, me b'y."

"I will know better next time."

"Oi hope ye will."

"But where will I find the two men I am after?"

The Irishman named an address, which Dick stored away in his memory box with the determination not to lose it.

"Good enough, and much obliged to you," he said. "If they shou'd come here before I find them, you just tell 'em the boss wants to see 'em soon as possible, will you?"

"Thot same Oi will, me b'y."

"And now, what is the way out of here?"

"Come along, and Oi'll show ye."

The Irishman passed along up the side of the dug-out, and pointed to a door at the end of an alley.

"Ye go reight through dhere," he said.

"Ye will foind yersel' dhen on a strate not much bigger nor dhis alley, which leads to the t'roughfare."

Dick thanked the man, making some witty remark that caused the Irishman to laugh, and made haste to get out of the place.

He was soon on the narrow street, and ere long out upon the main streets once more.

"Well, here I am again," he said to himself. "Bet my hair has turned gray, for I never had such a shock in my life as when I was dropped into that hole. But, it will be my drop next, I'm thinkin'."

He said this in a grim manner.

If the Irishman had given him a straight tip, he was still on the trail, and he meant to make all haste to find the two rascals again.

He went to the address he had received.

It was a rattletrap old house, in one of the very worst sections of the city, and its exterior was suggestive of many a dark crime within.

Dick had altered his disguise.

He walked past the house, looking at it critically, but in a way not to draw attention to himself.

The front door was ajar, as he noted.

In fact, it had the appearance of being impossible to close, and by the looks of the den it mattered little whether it was closed or not.

"That is a hard-lookin' hole, hang me for a kitten if it ain't!" muttered the young detective, in his former dock-rat parlance. "It will be all a feller's life is worth to venture in there."

He went on, crossed the street, and stopped to reflect.

"It has got to be done," he decided. "I bet copper to brass that Phil is in there, and if he is he has got to come out forthwith, or pretty presently thereafter; selah! He treated me like a human being, and I am going to pay him back for it, or lose a leg a-tryin'."

There was a look of determination on Dick's face.

He was now on the same side of the street the house was on, and he retraced his steps toward it.

The door was within reach from the side walk, only two short steps leading to the sill, and he stepped up these and gently pushed the door open.

A hall was disclosed, foul and grim with dirt.

By the looks of things, every room in the

den contained a family, and by the babel of voices, Dick concluded that every family was foreign.

In the narrow hallway sacks of old rags were piled nearly to the ceiling, leaving a space barely wide enough to crowd through, and the smell that emanated from the whole was not savory.

"Gee-whizz!" exclaimed Dick, under his breath. "This is no palace, I'll be bound. About the worst hole I ever got into in my life. The nest I used to have under the docks would be a lady's boo-boo alongside o' this. Wonder if that Irishman was givin' me a steer?"

He doubted whether he had been directed aright.

While he was thinking what move to make, and how to proceed, the sound of a man's voice in loud laughter came to his ears.

Immediately following the laugh came the words:

"Pretty good, Hop; pretty good!"

Dock-boy Dick felt a thrill of delight.

He was on the right track; he had found his game!

"Now for it," he said to himself. "Two to one, and only half a one at that, but what I lack in size I make up in grit, an' I don't scare off worth a flip. There will be fun on the carpet soonly, I imagine, an' mebby I'll be right in the middle of it."

The sound of the voices had come from below stairs.

Dick cast about to find the door.

He made his way on through the narrow passage to the rear of the hall.

There he came to a narrow offset; on the right, not more than three feet in the square, and there was the door.

It was closed.

Dick tried it carefully.

It was not fastened, and he cautiously opened it.

A flight of heavy, common steps was revealed, and below was a flickering, unsteady light.

Voices were heard plainly.

Dick descended a couple of steps, with the tread of a cat, and closed the door after him.

He would have to go down two or three steps more before his feet could be seen from below, and he stopped where he had to listen, before taking any further risk.

"Find him?" he heard a man saying. "He might as well look for a drop of water in a bucketful."

"But he will know where to find us."

"Let him."

"And if he goes to nosing around—"

"We'll attend to that, if he tries it on. This is our ranch, ain't it?"

"Well, yes."

"And we are boss, ain't we?"

"Yes; but he could come and force a search, and there we would be."

"Don't you worry about that, old boy. But, if we have to, we can move the boarder to another place."

"That is what I am gettin' at."

Dick took it all in, and needless to quote all that was said.

Not daring to risk his legs where they might be seen, Dick got down and put his head down first.

He had to cling to the steps with all his strength, but he was equal to the feat, and gradually he brought his eyes below the level of the boards that marked the edge of the opening.

He saw two men seated on either side of a table.

On the table was a candle, and a current of air from somewhere was causing it to flare and flicker.

One of the men had his back toward Dick, but he could see something of the other's face, and he recognized him at once as the man called Bat Dugan.

Dick knew it would be taking a great risk, but he resolved to go down.

If discovered, it would no doubt mean his death, this time. They would know for a certainty that he was after them.

With the silence of a shadow, almost, he regained his upright position, and that done, began to go down, step by step, without a sound. He was ready to retreat at the first alarm.

The thing he feared was that a step might creak.

The men did not look up, and there was no reason why they should, hearing no noise.

It had been noted, and Dick had heard, that the mere presence of a person in a room with another, even though no sound be made, will sometimes be enough to apprise the one of the presence of the other.

This was what Dick feared, too, and he was watchful.

Not for a second did he remove his eyes from the two men.

But, in this case the saying did not hold good, and the young detective gained the bottom without discovery.

He stopped for a moment, crouching close to the steps.

He was looking around for a place of concealment, and in a moment or two he had discovered one which he thought would do.

Before he could reach it, however, one of the men got up.

CHAPTER XVI.

DICK'S LITERAL DROP.

DOCK-BOY DICK felt his heart stop beating.

He could not move, for the moment, and it was the most fortunate thing in the world that he did not do so.

As the man got up, his body cast a shadow over that part of the dismal cellar where Dick stood, and with the glare and flicker of the candle still in his eyes, the man did not see the young detective.

What he had got up for was a bottle that stood on a shelf hard by.

This he secured and sat down again.

While he was on his feet, though, Dick had recovered himself and taken advantage of the moment.

With a quick movement he placed himself behind a couple of barrels which were standing a little further back, just by the side of the flight of steps, and here he felt secure.

"Gee-whizz!" he said to himself in exclaim, "but that made my hair stand on end. Here I am, in the lions' den, as it were, and not a weapon as big as a popgun with which to defend myself. If I am going to play detective, I think I had better get myself a gun."

But, Dick had ever been modest about his detective exploits.

He did not consider that a revolver at the hip and a pocketful of handcuffs made any one a detective.

The two men sampled the contents of the bottle, while they continued their conversation, and their daring young shadower drank in what they had to say while they drank something else.

Finally they prepared to leave the den.

"Better take a look at the pig in the pen before we go, hadn't we?" suggested Keelough.

"Maybe we had," assented Dugan.

"Fetch along the light, then."

This was the point Dock-boy Dick had been desiring to reach.

He wanted to learn where the prisoner was confined, and the way to get at him, and he paid close attention.

Dugan picked up the candle and followed Keelough to the opposite end of the cellar, where Dick saw Keelough open a door, and both passed from sight.

Dick hardly knew what to do.

He did not like the idea of risking the leaving of his place of concealment.

If discovered, they would make short work of him, and the prisoner would be left helpless in their hands.

He stood up, stretched his neck as far as possible over the barrels, trying to look into the place into which the two men had gone, but he could not do that, as the door was not open wide.

By the light, however, he could tell that they had stopped.

He heard them talking, but could not catch what was said.

Presently a sound was heard as of the dull dropping of a heavy door, and the light moved.

Dick dropped down just in time.

The two men came out, and the candle was replaced on the table.

"No need to worry about him, Bat," assured Hop. "He is all right. Put out the light."

"Yes, he is all right, you bet. Got the key?"

"Yes."

Dugan put out the light, then, and felt his way to the steps, which his comrade had already reached.

They went up, and Dick heard the door closed and locked, and heard them pass along the hall to the front and go out. And he was left alone like a rat in a trap, in their dismal den.

But, he did not feel like a prisoner.

He got out from his place of concealment, and, had there been light enough, he would have danced a jig, perhaps.

He felt like it, anyhow.

"Gee-lorious!" he exclaimed. "Seems to me a little bit of detective luck has come my way at last. Maybe I am a smarter feller than I think I am. I hope so, anyhow. Now for business."

What he wanted first was a light.

He felt in his pockets for a match, and at last found one, and one only.

Making his way to the table, he secured the candle before he lighted the match, lest the match might fail him.

As the wick was still warm, it lighted easily.

"Now, this is something like," said Dick to himself. "I have dropped to the racket, I guess, and now the next thing will be to find the prisoner and drop out of this unwholesome hole."

With the candle in hand, he took a survey of the place.

It was a hole, and little more.

There were a couple of bunks, some barrels, and a lot of rifled boxes and papers on the floor showing that it was the hiding-place of a brace of thieves.

In fact, Dick found some stolen goods stored away, as he made the round of the place, and recognized some for which he knew a reward had been offered some time before.

He seemed to be right in luck.

Satisfied that he was alone, and that there was no danger near at hand which he must guard against, he went to the door at the end of the cellar.

He opened it, and found himself in a place about six feet square. He had no idea what the hole had been made for, but rightly guessed that it was to accommodate the door he found in the floor.

Putting down his light, he tried to lift this door.

There was a ring in it, but the very appearance of the trap proved that it was heavy, and Dick doubted whether he could lift it.

He had to exert his last ounce of strength, almost, before he could budge it, but finally he had the satisfaction of feeling it move, and then it came open.

It had been closed with considerable force, which had stuck it fast.

Raising it, he laid it over backward and looked down, shading the light of the candle with his hands so that it might not be put out.

Beneath was a hole, about the size of the space, or maybe a little bigger, which was walled up with stone. And at one side, lying on the damp floor, Dick saw a man.

The candle flickered so that Dick could not get a good look at the man's face, but he appeared to be asleep.

Near him, on the floor, was a jug.

Dick spoke, but got no answer, and he began to fear that the man might be dead. The thought alarmed him.

There were no steps, or other means of getting down, and how to do it, and still keep the candle lighted, was a puzzle to Dick for some moments, but soon an idea came to him.

He remembered a frame of a lantern he had seen while making the round of the cellar, and if he could fix the candle in that, the chances were that he could secure the frame to his waist in such a manner as to insure its safety while he let himself down.

Returning to the larger part of the cellar, he quickly had the lantern in his possession.

It was just what he wanted.

There was a place in the bottom for the reception of a candle, and when he put the candle in it, and closed the slide, he had nearly as much again light as before.

"That is all hunk," he said, cheerfully. "Now for a string to tie it with, and I shall be all hunker. Philip, old boy, if that is you, I will have you out of there in a brief space of while, you bet!"

There was plenty of string to be picked up around the cellar, and Dick soon had the lantern attached to his waist.

He returned then to the hole in the floor of the adjoining apartment.

The hole was of good size, maybe three feet square, and the distance to the bottom of the space below looked to be about seven feet.

Dick put his feet down, sitting on the edge of the hole at one side, and then reaching over he took a firm hold upon the opposite side with his hands and swung loose, and as he hung there for a moment before dropping he looked at the prisoner.

It was Phil Holland, sure enough.

Dick dropped carefully, and his light withstood the shock.

Taking the lantern from his waist, the rescuer immediately gave his attention to the prisoner.

Listening, he made up his mind that the man was only asleep, so he gave him a shaking to rouse him up, and in a moment succeeded in doing so.

"Wretches!" cried the prisoner, jerking away from Dick's touch. "Are you not satisfied yet? You have robbed me; what more do you want? Must you also torture my friends—"

But Dick made him recognize who he was.

CHAPTER XVII.

DOING A BIG DASH.

Dock-Boy Dick felt immensely elated.

The chance had come for him to do his friend a good turn sooner than he had looked for it.

The consideration and kindness with which Phil Holland had treated the boy had won his regard, and Dick would have waded through fire and water to accomplish this end.

"Not you?" the prisoner cried.

"Bet your life it's me!" exclaimed Dick.

"But, how did you find me? How could you find me?"

"By fixin' my terrible eye upon the rascal that put ye here."

"God bless you, my boy! You will lose nothing by this favor, I promise you that."

"I ain't lookin' fer pay," averred Dick. "That was all settled 'fore I commenced. Hold out your hands, now, and let me set ye free. Feet tied too? Yes, I thought so."

In a moment the prisoner had the use of his limbs, and Dick helped him to stand up.

A shiver passed over the man.

"Ugh! I am chilled to the bone," he said. "I fought off sleep as long as I could, and when it came it must have been sound. I heard nothing till you shook me to awaken me."

"And then you would have choked me if you had not been tied up; ha, ha!"

"Far from it now, though, Dick, my boy," taking his hand and wringing it most heartily. "But, my uncle: he must be nearly crazed."

"Not half as near as he will be," snapped Dick.

"Why, what do you mean, boy?"

"I mean that he is the rankest old sinner this side of the warm clime, and that he is the man that put you where you are."

"My uncle?" in mild amaze.

"Yes, your uncle. Pity he wasn't a mummy all over, same as his hand!"

"Dick, have a care. You must be sure of your ground before you make a charge like that. What has put this into your head?"

"Say, do I look crazy?"

"No."

"It's a fact that you was a prisoner here, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"And it is another fact that I am here to get you out, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, the way that I found you was by watchin' your rascal of an uncle and shadowin' the tools that he had hired to put you here."

Holland looked at Dick in a dazed sort of way.

"Tell me all about it," he requested.

"You tell me all about how you came here, first," Dick demanded.

"Why, simple enough. I was set upon by some fellows, knocked half-senseless, robbed, and thrown into this hole."

"And you had that diamond with you?"

"To be sure!"

"Jes' so; and Renaud Serpolet has been arrested for murdering you, because that diamond was found in his possession this morning!"

"The rascal! Then he was one—"

"Oh, no; the rascal was your uncle, whose heart is about as shriveled as his right hand is. I was watchin' him, and I saw him put the diamond in the place where it was found."

"This passes all belief, boy."

"Can't help it; them's grim fax, sure pop," dropping into his gamin parlance.

Thereupon Dick told the whole story, to which the young man listened with the keenest interest, hardly able to believe that he was awake.

"Nice old gentleman, ain't he?" Dick wound up.

"And he my mother's brother!"

"Not meanin' any disrespect to your mother, but I would say he is first-cousin to the Old Boy."

"And you can prove what you have told me?"

"It is our business to go to work and prove it as soon as we get out of here, and we mustn't monkey another minute about that."

"No, for the rascals may return."

"Do you feel strong?"

"Indignation lends me strength."

"All right, no matter where you get it so long as it is there. We have got to climb out of here."

"We can do it."

"And are you armed?"

"No."

"Neither am I; haven't even a putty-blower. But, we'll try to give them some fun if they tackle us, you bet."

They quickly arranged their plan.

Dick got upon Holland's back, the young man leaning over with his hands on his knees, and easily got out through the opening.

As soon as he was out he ran into the main part of the cellar and got a box which he threw down into the hole, and with the aid of that Holland soon clambered up and out.

The door was closed down, and they also closed the door leading into the little six-by-six apartment.

"It may fool them when they come back, if we can leave the other door locked as it is," said Dick. "But, that is doubtful."

"Let them be thankful if we leave it on the hinges!" cried Holland.

They looked around in the cellar, and found an old hatchet and a short bar of iron.

Armed with these they mounted the stairs to the door that opened upon the hall, and they found the door locked, as Dick knew they would.

"I'll mighty soon fix that," avowed Holland.

With a swing, he brought the hatchet down upon the lock with all his might, breaking it at the first blow.

The door swung open, and they stepped out into the hall, where a couple of Italians, standing near the front door, eyed them suspiciously and with dark looks.

Catching the grim expression on the faces of the prisoners, though, and seeing the weapons in their hands, they fell back out of the way.

Dock-boy Dick and the man he had rescued passed out free.

"Good bless you!" ejaculated Holland, fervently.

"Never mind that," demanded Dick, "but send a message to that girl of yours that you are safe and sound, or she will have a fit."

"What know you about her?"

"Well, not much; only that she is there, and the police will be bothering her to get on track of you, which is a part of your dear uncle's plan."

"Then I must seek a telegraph office without delay, and after that we will take hold of the rest of the business and try to push it to a clearing up. If all is true that you assert, Belchaine ought to hang!"

"And it is true, bet your life."

"Yes, and now I can see through it, I think."

"That's what I want to do. What is the secret of it all?"

"A big property at stake."

"Ha!"

"Yes, all that I am worth in the world. If I die before I marry, all of my mother's half of the French estate will go to my uncle, and if all this is true, that is what he is after."

"That's it, I bet a herring! But, we will see to his case, you bet! Why, he would have allowed Serpolet to swing, I believe!"

"If capable of one crime, equal to any."

"Tell you what would be fun, and what would knock him silly."

"What's that?"

"Play the ghost racket on him!"

"Excellent! But, I must have witnesses by."

"We can fix it all up brown. We'll go to Police Headquarters soon's you send that message."

And so they did.

There they told the matter in full, in private to the chief.

Plans were quickly laid, and when they took their leave it was with an understanding with the police.

Phil Holland and Dick went to a hotel,

where they refreshed themselves and took a rest, and meantime the police successfully "scooped in" Boss Gluker, Hop Keelough and Bat Dugan.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TERRIBLE DENOUEMENT.

Dock-Boy Dick was in high feather the rest of the day.

He found in Phil Holland his ideal of a manly man, and loved him with all the ardor of his youthful nature.

And his regard was returned, not only because he had rendered such signal service to the young man, but because Phil had taken a liking to him from the very first meeting.

Preparations were quietly made for the denouement.

Early in the evening Joseph Belchaine was pacing up and down the corridor of the Hotel Brimton.

He appeared to be in anything but an easy frame of mind, but that was to be accounted for on the score of his grief and anxiety for his missing nephew, for the young man had not been heard from.

While he was thus engaged, a plain-looking man with drooping mustache entered the hotel and inquired for him at the clerk's desk.

The clerk pointed the man out.

"Mr. Joseph Belchaine?" asked the stranger, addressing him.

"Yes, sir," the response.

"I desire an interview with you, sir. I am the superintendent of metropolitan police."

Belchaine gave a start.

"Then you have word of my missing nephew?" he asked.

"Yes, his body has been found," was the sober response. "Shall we go up to your room?"

Belchaine turned pale to the lips, and caught hold of the back of a settee for support. This was news that he was not prepared for, evidently.

"Then he is dead!" he exclaimed. "My poor boy, my poor boy!"

"Let us go to your room, sir, where we can talk the matter over in private."

"Yes, yes; anywhere but here, sir. I can hardly hold back my tears. Where was he found?"

"It is quite a story, sir, let us wait until we reach your room."

They stepped to the elevator.

In a few moments they entered Belchaine's room, where the chief placed a chair for the old gentleman, and took one himself.

"Sit down, sir," he said, "for I can see you are quite overcome. I take the liberty to help you to a chair in your own room, but that matters not, under the circumstances."

"No, no, don't mention it; tell me about the boy."

"Well, it is something of a story, sir. I may as well begin at the beginning, I suppose."

Belchaine cast a sharp, quick glance at him.

"Your family inherited a princely fortune in France," spoke the cool, calm voice.

Finally, yourself and an only sister were the last remaining heirs. At her marriage the estate was divided between you."

The old man looked even more searchingly at the chief, and demanded:

"What has that got to do with the present?"

"Everything, sir, as I will show you immediately. You have about run through with your own fortune. There was no hope for you but to get a hold upon that of your dead sister, and in order to do that your nephew would have to be removed from your path, and that before he married."

Belchaine was sitting bolt upright, now,

his hands gripped upon the arm of his chair, his eyes dilated and his face like death itself.

"Wh—what do you mean?" he gasped.

"You learned that your nephew was about to marry," went on the hard, steady tone, "and you laid a trap to put him out of the way. You lured him here—"

"It is false—false!"

"I know it to be true, sir. Keep your seat and hear me to the end. You had a pretty plan, and you hoped to carry it out and fool us all, but, thanks to a young detective called Dock-boy Dick, you have been brought up with a round turn, and your little scheme has miscarried. You—"

"I say it is false!" cried the terrified man, leaping up. "What great mistake have you made? Was it not enough to bear the loss of the boy I loved, without being charged—"

"That will do, now," said the chief, forcing him down upon the chair again. "Remain quiet, or I will handcuff you."

"But, it is false!—as false as—"

"It is true."

It was the voice of Phil Holland!

A strange light filled the room, and before the door of the wardrobe was seen the form of the missing man!

He looked strangely white and death-like in the white glare of the new light, and he pointed with his finger straight at the cowering old man, whose face assumed an expression of greatest terror.

Belchaine sunk back, and perspiration started upon his forehead.

The chief of police stepped before him and snapped a pair of handcuffs upon him, and while he was doing that the strange light went out.

When he stepped back the ghostly form had disappeared, though the door of the wardrobe was still open, and the old man stared in blank amaze in that direction, fairly paralyzed.

"Will you still deny your guilt?" asked the cold, hard tone. "You are responsible for the death of your nephew, wretch that you are! and you would have put the crime upon an innocent man! It was you who put his glove in the room of the lapidary, you that put the diamond in the—"

"You cannot prove it! I defy you to prove a thing!"

The chief snapped his fingers.

"Can't prove it, hey, you old sinner?" cried a merry voice, and Dock-boy Dick danced into the room. "We'll show you about that, I guess!"

He entered from an adjoining room, and immediately after him came a policeman with Boss Gluker, Hop Keelough, Bat Dugan, and others, all prisoners, and Belchaine saw that it was all up.

He sunk back with a moan.

Renaud Serpolet, and his wife Nannette, were among those who confronted him.

"I could not understand how a man could be so heartless as to fasten such a crime upon another," said the chief, "but I have learned that, too. In time past you loved this handsome woman, and wanted her for your wife, but she preferred Serpolet the lapidary, poor though he was, and you swore that some day you would bring him to grief for robbing you, as you put it. And this was your revenge."

Belchaine had nothing to say.

His very silence was an acknowledgment of his guilt, even without the proof.

Suddenly he leaped to his feet, jerking his withered hand out of the handcuff—which could not hold it, and sprung upon Nannette.

"This I can do!" he cried. "I can mar your beauty! I can cause you to wither as a flower, and die within a year! Whatever the skeleton hand touches, dies, and you shall die!"

He reached for her face with his withered,

claw-like hand; but, Dock-boy Dick was on the alert and in his way.

"No you don't!" the young shadower cried. "If you want to touch anybody, touch me, and I will take all the chances of dying! Pity you wasn't withered all over, you heartless old villain!"

Others had hold of him instantly, and he was rendered powerless to do harm to any one.

Finally the old scoundrel confessed.

He declared, however, that it had not been his intention to kill his nephew. He merely meant to keep him prisoner until he had come into the estate, and had made good his escape, when he would order his release.

But, that was not believed. He was committed to prison, but he died there in less than ten days, broken-hearted under the blight of his own infamy.

Dock-boy Dick received great praise for what he had done.

But for him the heinous scheme might have been carried out successfully, although Dick tried to disclaim any of the honors.

Holland did not forget the debt of gratitude he owed the lad, by any means. He took pains to find out what Dick liked best, in the lines of life-work, and fully equipped him for that field.

The Serpolets, too, he established anew in life, hoping as he did so that it would be of lasting benefit, but at the same time fearing it would soon be the old story with them.

Holland returned home, where he married the lady of his choice, but the wonderful Belchaine diamond was not allowed to disgrace the finger of his bride.

The gem was sold, and the price was given to charity.

THE END.

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